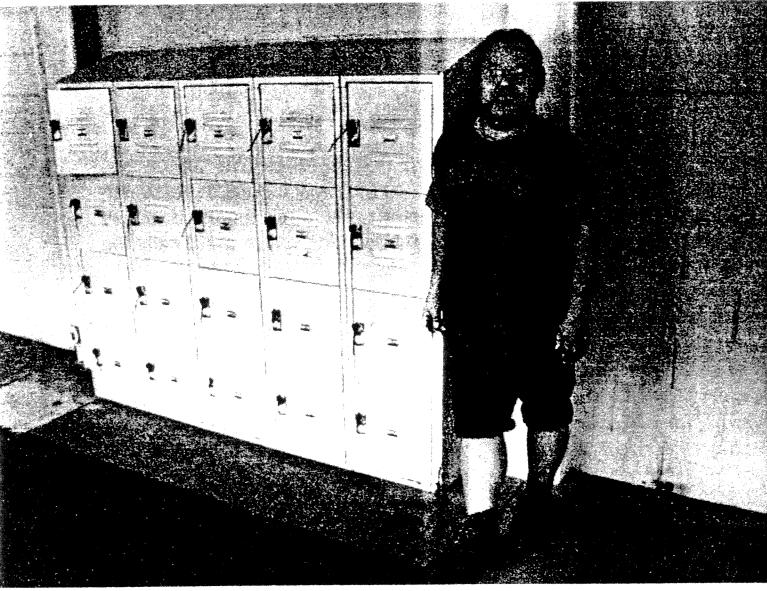


Some Hope And Some Despair

Issue II / Late 2007 / 5 Dollars (w/7 inch)



Instigators
Jesus Couldnt Drum
The Sears
This Is My Fist



SOME HOPE AND SOME DESPAIR

Issue 11

Late 2007

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PO Box soon, I swear!

Sorry about the fucked up page order with issue 10!

Just a brief note about the new issue...

The first 100 copies come with the recently reissued "Waiting On The Ground" 7" by J Church. It was originally released in Australia only by Spiral Objective. The b-sides are "Ayn Rand Is Dead" and "College Station".

Next issue will feature Chumbawamba, the Ex, the Post Punk Kitchen and more.



HEALTH

I guess I haven't gone into much detail about my health situation in the last few newsletters. Here's a brief version of what's been going on:

First of all, I am no longer on hemo-dialysis. I've made the switch to peritoneal and it's made my life a lot better. I no longer have to get up in the morning and go to the clinic. I just do my bags from home. Instead of four hours a session three times a week, I do this version four times a day, but it's only 15 minutes total and I can do it while I'm watching TV or sitting at the computer. In the long term, if I never get the transplant I need I can have a much longer life expectancy on peritoneal as it's much easier on my system. I'm not draining and cleaning all of my blood three times a week AND because I do it so often, it's a better clean anyway. Most importantly, no more needles. The needles were starting to really freak me out and getting stuck several times a week was super painful. None of that anymore. It's been really great overall.

One of the biggest benefits I've been noticing has been with my shrink. Seems like changing my dialysis has helped break me out of some of the depression and anxiety I float back and forth between. There are still LOADS of problems and post-traumatic stress isn't something that's got a quick cure. We've been working for a year now and it feels like there's a long way to go. I won't go into the depressing details, but my shrink helps a lot and home dialysis seems to make me feel more positive (even if the new schedule sometimes has me up until 5:00 AM watching X-Files re-runs).

I'm waiting to hear back about my first test for the transplant. Then I've got to find a kidney. I'm also getting my sleep apnea machine in the next few days. I feel more and more like a PKD short story every day. It's weird. It's cyber. I DO feel paranoid. 700 pages of declassified CIA docs aren't helping. Don't think for a minute I didn't read through them the moment they went on-line.

HEALTH NEWS

I've basically spent the last two weeks in hospitals, clinics and doctor's offices. It started with me having a long appointment with my nephrologists. I like Dr. Simmons and enjoy chatting with her. But this led to a week of tests, a full day's orientation, and then more tests. The good news is I'm now officially on the transplant waiting list. I do need to see a dentist, but I've already got a spot on the list and if I can find a kidney donor that would be even better. I basically have had two physicals, several ultrasounds, even more EKGs, lots of x-rays, and more blood work than the rest of my life combined. So much blood!

I met with the surgeon and he said that he thought I was a perfect candidate, which was nice to hear. I also learned a lot more about kidney rejection and how immediate rejection happens less than 1% of the time. Even if it starts to have trouble in the first year, there are things they can do. Some transplant patients have had their kidneys for 30 years at this point. It really is the second most common transplant procedure, so I suddenly have a lot more confidence in the process. It wasn't long ago that a kidney transplant would only last a few years. I don't even need to do the steroid treatment.

I've also had to get back on Epogen. I had been taking the stuff when I was still sticking with needles. Basically, with kidney failure, you don't have enough red blood cells. It makes you wiped out all the time. My muscles were killing me and I felt like I had mono. So, I need to take Epogen shots once a week. I shoot myself and I have to admit, I was really freaked out about it the first time. Needles freak me out anyway, but to have to give myself a real shot was freaky. But it doesn't really hurt. It's okay.

Incidentally, Epogen is the stuff that is so controversial in distance sports like the Tour De France. It can help you stay energized and keeps your muscles going when they would otherwise start aching, which is why they can cause an unfair advantage. Lance Armstrong was almost definitely taking this stuff (along with steroids).

There are two main issues I'm dealing with now. The first is financing. I'm working with a new social worker to try and sort as much funding out as possible. The only good thing about my crappy video store job is that I make so little money, I probably qualify for a lot of low income subsidies as I make below the poverty line of the country. Medicare only lasts for three years after a transplant. So the reality is I need to find some sort of health care of some other alternative to pay for the meds (\$5000 a month) I'll be needing for the rest of my life.

The second problem is finding a kidney. The list could take up to three years. The best result is to find someone to donate. I know this sounds ridiculous and I feel stupid asking (but my doctors say I should) if there is anyone out there at all interested in donating a kidney, I need someone blood type A or O. If you are at all interested, and I don't blame you if you're not, please email me at honeybearrecords@yahoo.com.

MILESTONES

JEAN BAUDRILLARD (June 20, 1929 – March 6, 2007)

I always thought I would get to meet Baudrillard some day. It makes me very sad that this will never happen. I always felt like I was getting close. I always seemed to know someone taking a course of his or involved in some experiment in Las Vegas or something. He really was the world's last philosopher and with the death of Derrida a few years earlier, really leaves me with the same confused and weightless feeling when a parent dies.

Baudrillard was known for a lot of things. In post-structural thought, he founded the notions of hyper-reality and simulacra, all of which needed to at least be explored by his contemporaries. For me personally, I have to admit that I first came across the vernacular of the hyper-real via Umberto Eco, it was "Simulations" by Baudrillard that was the last of a series of books to really blow my mind. The late '80s and early '90s were all about me reading "Forget Foucault" (though I've always had intense respect for Foucault and what is as close to anyone defining post-structuralism at all), "The Ecstasy of Communication", "The Mirror of Production", "Seduction", "America" and "In The Shadow Of The Silent Majorities". Admittedly, these dense and often experimental texts were a challenge for me and I found myself having to read some pages more than once before they had any impact. But the lasting impact changed my life and I think everyone of those titles is well worth tracking down if you are not already familiar with his writings.

Post-structuralism, for me, had the same appeal as post-punk and hardcore. I had missed out on punk, so these later, more extreme tendencies were a logical step. The same is true to a certain extent as post-structuralism was born in the '60s after the events of May 1968 in France and the popularizing of the Situationist International. Post-structuralism seemed like the logical cultural analysis to come from that era and the more extreme philosophical continuation of Situationist thought.

The notion that perception of an audience defines a work more than the author or artist's intention for me implied that the author or artist never owns their creation once it's made public, something I've always instinctively believed. Intellectual property is intellectual theft.

Baudrillard's theory of seduction and simulacra, though never directly referenced, seemed the most related to the Situationist ideas, particularly Debord's, of the Spectacle. Baudrillard was able to further divorce Marxism from the Spectacle showing that the systems of control were not necessarily based on power or knowledge. Most importantly, in our technological society, everything from the economy to war to religion to urban violence had become a largely fictitious reality, or map, that at some point superseded reality. He explained this hyper-reality with the phrase "the map precedes the territory".

I guess it's ridiculous for me to try to write anything seriously attempting to summarize his life. All I can say is that his writing had a profound impact on my life and, total honesty here, hugely guided most of the content of my songwriting and overall approach to writing in the past 17 or 18 years. There's not much else to say so I'll just end this with one of his great quotes.

"Deep down, no one really believes they have the right to live. But this death sentence generally stays tucked away, hidden beneath the difficulty of living. If that difficulty is removed from time to time, death is suddenly there, unintelligibly."

Coltrane, Alice (Aug. 1937 – Jan. 2007)

Hopefully you all know that Alice Coltrane was a lot more than just John Coltrane's wife. A classically trained pianist, she contributed greatly to the later Coltrane band (as evidence especially on their "Live At The Village Vanguard Again!" recording). But after his death in 1967, she continued to make extremely inventive and challenging music with her dexterous piano, keyboard, synth and harp performances. Playing with some of the best in avant-garde music in the late '60s and early '70s, her name should be synonymous with Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, Frank Lowe, etc. Like her husband, she was also interested in mysticism from around the world in particular Eastern spirituality. Some of her most exciting records were the middle ground between her secular and spiritual lives such as "Transcendence" or "Transfiguration".

In more recent times, she had gotten back to recording with a new LP in 2004 with folks like Charlie Haden and Jack DeJohnette. She was back to doing live dates in 2005 and 2006. She died on January 12th in Los Angeles or respiratory failure.

Everybody is checking out... Death is all around... July 30th was death day. It's too depressing to write much.

Michelangelo Antonioni (Sept 29, 1912 - July 30th, 2007)

One of my all-time favorite directors, who made some of my all-time favorite films including "L'Avventura", "La Notte", "L'Eclisse" and "Red Desert".

Ingmar Bergman (July 14, 1918 - July 30th, 2007)

Some of the most challenging and upsetting films with tone that would put Polanski to shame like "Wild Strawberries", "Through A Glass Darkly" and "Persona".

Tom Snyder (May 12th, 1936 - July 30th, 2007)

Self-deprecating and funny, he was one of the few interesting voices in '70s television and the only talk show worth watching at the time. I loved his feature on the Clash and Futura. Who else would have thought to interview Wendy O. Williams BEFORE the Plasmatics.

Tony Wilson (Feb. 20, 1950 – Aug. 10, 2007)

I can't believe Tony Wilson is dead. Even before the film, Factory Records was as much an inspiration to me as Crass or Corpus Christi. Moreso in some ways as I loved the aesthetic sense and the way they were able to change with the times. I loved Joy Division (like every punk should) but I also really loved New Order and thought the Happy Mondays were really great at times.

To be honest, I didn't even know Wilson had cancer. I hadn't been following his battles with the NHS over getting the proper medication. It's really crazy. Turns out it was a heart attack and not the renal cancer that got him in the end. Pretty shocking that the doctors announced that his death was unrelated to the cancer.

It's still all quite sad to me. Suddenly 57 seems really young to die. I had just finally gotten around to watching "Tristram Shandy" and loving it. It's been a rough time with Peel, Loder and now Wilson. I think it's safe to say that nothing I've done in the music world, as inconsequential as that might be, would have occurred without Factory Records.

Alan McGee was right in saying, "without Tony Wilson there would be no indie labels."

Max Roach (Jan 10th, 1924 - Aug 15, 2007)

I am so sad that Max Roach has died. One of the greatest drummers of all time, he was the man behind "We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite" which, to me is one of the most important jazz records of all time. He was one of the few players to successfully work in both Bebop and the avant-garde working with greats in both areas from Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Mingus and Sonny Rollins to Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp and Anthony Braxton. He even performed with Fab Five Freddie. The last thing I had heard from him was the beautiful and spare soundtrack work he did for the film "How To Draw A Bunny". Very, very sad day.

STORM THE TOWER R.I.P.

I went and saw Storm The Tower's final show last night. Jug wants to spend more time on his shop, while Chris and Brett are gonna start something new. It was a little sad, but also probably the best time I'd seen them in a while. At the end, Mark, their original singer, got to sing and they ended with a cover of "Death Comes Ripping" with Ben singing.

When Ben got on the mic, he started with a little speech about how important Storm The Tower was. At first I was thinking, "oh no, here comes a teary eyed, drunken rant." But he's right. Storm The Tower was the start of this cool little scene in Austin that began with their classic demo and, for all intensive purposes, ended last night. Storm The Tower are gone. Army Of Jesus split up a few months back. Signal Lost, who also played last night, are mostly out to sea with Stan moving away.

This isn't to say that everyone won't start new and possibly great bands. There certainly are other interesting bands in Austin (Manikin, who opened last night are great, Finally Punk are cool). But this is the end of an era. It's not the kind of era that's gonna get much press. But it was a moment in Austin that resulted in a series of great gigs, some cool records and a nice conclusion.

If anyone out there has the inclination, there is a lot of great Storm The Tower material, including a second 7" that I was supposed to put out but couldn't after the fire fucked up all my finances. Someone could do a really great retrospective CD.

ATROCIOUS MUSICAL TASTE

I have, at times, atrocious musical taste. I like a lot of cool stuff, and I try to write about the stuff I think is cool. Mostly, I write about music because I think that there is a lot of cool stuff out there that maybe not everyone is aware of. I'm old and I'm a nerd, so I'm a wealth of non-essential music info.

So before you stare blankly at a list of reissued Italian hardcore records from the '80s, I can hopefully give you some context.

I also recognize that it must in some small way make me look cool to write about this stuff. Even though I really have no business talking about avant-garde jazz, I do. Though I'm in no way part of that community, I've studied it enough that by now I can get interviews with people like Susie Ibarra or Bill Dixon. I love the music, sure. The music is what really compels me. But I do know that it makes me seem like at least some sort of expert. It makes me seem smart.

But I'm not smart. Oh no, I do love a lot of the music that I don't dare speak its name in text. Well, I've got a new shrink and it's time to start fessing up. I like a lot of stuff that ranges from total bullshit to just painfully obvious stuff. I like shit like Pavement or the Postal Service, the kind of shit that even makes me roll my eyes when they get name dropped. I also love the total crap like, I dunno, Bread, Wings, uh, Chicago.

At first it was pure nostalgia. No big deal, I can just make a few mix tapes and listen to them in the privacy of my own home. I guess I was treating it like an addiction that was more embarrassing than socially unacceptable... like being a "choco-holic" or something.

Then I started tracking down some of the records. At first it was just compilations. The great thing about being into total crap, especially total crap from the '70s, is that all you really ever need are the hits. You don't need the whole ELO catalog. You just need "Ole". I could even buy any random K-Tel comp and find four or five songs I liked which is more than I can say from most compilation records I hear.

But soon that wasn't enough. I think part of it was that music began dying a horrible death with the birth of the compact disc. All the grief people are experiencing now with on-line music started with the CD and the shift in balance it created from art to commodity. Nothing was really the same when that revolution was over and the forces of evil won out. The fight to save vinyl has always been a Sisyphus-ean task and I love a losing battle.

Anyway, music in general became entirely capitalistic at that point. The notion of making money dominated everything and entertainment won a glutinous victory over art. Even the stuff I liked didn't have the same feel seeing as the whole notion of the CD was so totally cynical, I could never entirely get past it. I've never been one of those people who could just look at a painting and appreciate it for its technique. My love for contemporary art has more to do with my love of the artist, what circumstances they worked in and what brought them to the point of creating art. In a way, I'm the same with music in that I don't just like music for the sake of music. I can't just pick up music in any format and appreciate it equally. Context is everything and even if it sounds the same, even if it sounds BETTER, I prefer music analog to digital. Clearly it's not an aesthetic choice so much as, maybe not political, but instinctive.

My love for record shopping at that point made a sharp turn in one direction. I always loved used record shops. But now they were my one true love. If a used record shop knows what it's doing, there's always a dollar room. I love the dollar room. My fetish for record shopping (which is actually a little different from an addiction to record collecting) was allowed to really flourish during the dark times of the CD takeover.

Here's the thing: once you've found a mint copy of "Best of Bread" and "Best of Bread 2" or "Wings Greatest Hits", what do you do? That's when the record shopping fetish gets replaced by the record collector addiction. I find myself hunting down entire catalogs. It started with me, for some reason, feeling the need to buy every Lou Reed and Neil Young '70s LPs on vinyl no matter how lame they were. That evolved into me getting all the Bowie records. That turned into my very real obsession with the shittiest and most cynical of Stones compilations and live albums. Eventually that evolved into me finding original and rare editions of Wings records ("Venus And Mars" with insert, "Band On The Run" double LP version with poster). It finally did come full circle when I started repurchasing the Electric Light Orchestra albums I had previously owned as a child.

I know what you're thinking, what the fuck? How can I rant about the capitalism of CDs while buying some of the most bourgeois music of the '70s? Three things: first of all, I hated most of these records for years and while I do know they're crap (hence the title of this article) they're no worse than Radiohead or, I dunno, Turbonegro. Secondly, most of these records are mostly marred by ego, meaning they are ridiculously overproduced. The best ones can still be distilled down to some decent pop songs. Finally, shit, it's a dollar, right? I really don't feel like I'm in anyway contributing to the chaotic-evil, music industry. If anything, I'm helping pay the salary of the poor schlub whose job it is to process, alphabetize and maintain the dollar room. It's a shit job that I've had more than once.

I love the dollar room and I spend hours of my life in there. For a

while, Austin was lacking in dollar rooms. But I'm finding new secret spots. Maybe it's not so secret as who the hell is really trying to find full lengths by Pilot, Jigsaw and the Jefferson Airplane. I don't care. It's good for me and it's cheap. I have a hard time slowing my brain down (which is a lot of why I'm in therapy) and I can't stop thinking, so this is a good distraction that requires all of my limited mental capacity while keeping me physically busy. I could be drinking, right? Shit, I could be making letter bombs. Best I keep recording collecting and exercising my mind in quiet oblivion.

SOME MUSIC I'VE LEARNED TO LOVE ALL BECAUSE OF THE DOLLAR ROOM:

PRINCE "1999" 2xLP

PRINCE "Erotic City" 12"

PRINCE "Sign Of The Times" 2xLP

I used to love Prince. I love "Dirty Mind" and "Controversy". I thought I was so cutting edge digging songs like "Sister" and, my favorite Prince song of all time, "Annie Christian". Somewhere in the world is a lost J Church demo/live recording of us doing a half assed version of "When You Were Mine". Maybe we should seriously record that some day... I lost interest in Prince once he actually formed a band. I think a lot of the appeal of those early records was that he played just about all of the instruments himself. "Purple Rain" was fun, but I just wasn't that into it. Something about losing his bisexual element made him seem sort of tame and mainstream. Plus, he was suddenly a major star. I just couldn't dig it even though I thought it was really funny and sort of clever when he decided to change his name to that symbol.

Anyway, for 99¢ I decided to revisit "1999". Hey, that's a fucking great album. In fact, it's sort of genius. The band is really pretty good and the production is totally ridiculous. "Delirious" is the kind of pop that Outkast are mining today and we think they're so ahead of their time. "Lady Cab Driver" has all the aspects of early, slutty Prince that I loved so much. You know, "lately trouble winds are blowin' hard and I don't know if I can last." I hear ya. Not really. But, Prince, I live vicariously through your reckless sexuality. "Little Red Corvette" is just a great pop song.

Somewhere in that "1999" / "Purple Rain" zone, Prince had a big dance hit with "Erotic City". I remember first hearing it at a boarder dance (these were dances set up by "borders" at my high school meaning they were boarding in dorm rooms because they were from one of the other eight islands in Hawaii) that was invited to. I remember thinking that the boarders at my school must have crazy freedom as I swore they were singing "we can fuck until the dawn". It's a great record and the extended dance version is a coke fueled must (even for a teen like me who was, at best, high on sugar and adrenaline). I guess it's wrong to say that it's a coke fueled song. I think the druggy feel is mostly due to the song's similarities to "White Horse". "If you wanna ride..."

I've done some taste testing and I have to admit that I still don't like much post-"Controversy" Prince. But the one other record that I can't help but like is "Sign Of The Times". The front cover is really cool, about as close to Nan Goldin as Prince is gonna get. It's a double LP like "1999", and has some crazy tunes like "The Ballad Of Dorothy Parker" which I still think is a cool reference even if the songs may really have nothing to do with her. "I Could Never Take The Place Of Your Man" is another amazing pop song. Even with the sort of unnecessary guitar outro, it's still amazing and enough to make this whole record worth while. I like that so many of the song titles are these long phrases. It reminds me of Dillinger 4 in a weird way.

CARS, THE "The Cars" LP

CARS, THE "Candy-O" LP

CARS, THE "Panorama" LP

Everybody knows the first Cars album. It's great. I didn't get into it right away. I mean, they've got some credentials with David Robinson from the original Modern Lovers on drums. But I remember Mark Mothersbaugh at the time totally trashing the Cars for being a watered down, mersh version of Devo. Maybe that's not how the groups started. But that was how they were marketed. So I couldn't really get into them.

The first album is great and there's no reason why you should ever pay more than a buck for it. I swear, if it's not in your local dollar bin, it will within the next month or two. But you know this record: "My Best Friend's Girlfriend", "Let The Good Times Roll" and, of course, "Just What I Needed". This record was so big, I must have heard these songs a hundred times. Yet, I can still listen to them endlessly.

The second album was also a big hit with that great, kinda weird title track. A lot of people forget, but I remember that at the time, "Let's Go" was the group's biggest song. It's not the kind of music I would ever really want to play. It's so modern sounding. But that's part of what makes it so

interesting. Plus Elliot Easton is sort of a guitar hero to me.

"Panorama" is a vastly underrated record. Say what you want about the Cars, but for the first few years they were really trying. At least as far as songwriting, they did the work. It's a strange record and not obviously commercial. The best they could come up with for a single was "Touch And Go", which was really pretty inaccessible with it's weird time signature on the verses. It was a bold choice. My favorite song on the record is "Gimme Some Slack". In some ways, it's a song that actually is the most like something you would find on the first Devo record. But the Cars make it fit better into a pop format. I didn't even know what "Gimme Some Slack" meant at the time.

Then the Cars went on to make a bunch of rubbish.

POLICE, THE "Outlandos D'Amour" LP

POLICE, THE "Regatta De Blanc" LP

POLICE, THE "Zenyatta Mondatta" LP

POLICE, THE "Ghost In The Machine" LP

Yeah, I know, I hate 'em too. What the fuck was wrong with these people, right? What stupid album titles! I remember other artists would diss on them and I think the funniest was Elvis Costello making fun of Sting's fake Jamaican accent. I mean, what was that all about? Isn't that like me trying to talk jive?

Forget all that. We're not talking about the real value (or lack thereof) of the Police. We're talking about their dollar bin value. This is true quantum economics. For a buck, the first four records are pretty cool. The first one is sort of like the first Cars record where once you play it you'll realize that you sort of know all the songs. Well, you'll know the good half like "Next To You", "So Lonely", "Can't Stand Losing You" and you will know never again to listen to "Peanuts" or "Born In The 50's".

"Regatta De Blanc", I don't know what this record is all about. For a buck you get "Message In A Bottle" and "Walking On The Moon" which, 25 years later, isn't the worst dub you've ever heard in your life.

I don't even know if I'm spelling "Zenyatta Mondatta" right, but I forgot to bring it to the desk and the record is far too insignificant for me to go into the other room and dig it out of my collection. By now the Police were on a downward spiral and this was the worst record but had some of their biggest hits with "Don't Stand So Close To Me" (which I kind of like now) and "De Do Do Do Da Da Da" (which somehow seems even worse now). I've always like "Canary In A Coalmine" form some reason and it turns out that after all this time it's the best song on the record.

"Ghost In The Machine" is just a flat out poor record. But for a buck, I can almost enjoy "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic" or whatever. Actually, this record has my all time favorite Police song. I actually think it's a really fantastic moment, no lie. "Invisible Sun" is just amazing. It's another one I would love for us to cover. That one song, for me, is better than the first three records combined. Even though this is easily the worst Police record of the four worth buying, "Invisible Sun" alone makes it the most important.

I guess the Police are a good example of how context can be everything. Maybe in another 20 years "De Do Do Do..." will seem deep and meaningful.

ROMANTICS, THE "s/t" LP

ROMANTICS, THE "National Breakout" LP

ROMANTICS, THE "Strictly Personal" LP

ROMANTICS, THE "In Heat" LP

I saw the Romantics play at the Andrews Amphitheater at UH back in, I dunno, 1981? They were great. Seriously. They kinda rocked in a perfect garage band experience that I had only read about. I was inspired. I bought a bandana. Seriously.

The first LP is a solid record. It's not really a guilty pleasure and there are many songs as good as the hit, "What I Like About You". "When I Look In Your Eyes" is amazing as is "First In Line" and the thrashing "Little White Lies". It's retro even for those times. But it's great raw garage punk that might not really be in the Michigan tradition. It's more like a punky Standells.

"National Breakout" is not as good, lacks some of the hooks. But it's still a raw garage rock record. In a way those first two records sort of defined garage rock for me as it did have a big '60s British influence while sounding very American. People say "Tomboy" is that standout of the album and it's great. But I really like "21 And Over". I think it was on some cheesy compilation I got when I was a kid. I think it was called "Exposed" or something like that.

"Strictly Personal" isn't that great and I don't just say that because of the painful record cover. There was always something goofy about their

fashion. First it was all red leather. When I saw them it was all black leather. On this record, pink leather. Still, some great songs like "In The Nighttime" which is as sentimental as anything they did.

"In Heat" is where I draw the line. I love the big hits. I really do. I think "Talking In Your Sleep" is a great song, lisp and all and in a weird way I think it was the predecessor to "Monkey Gone To Heaven". I swear it's true. In a weird way, I actually prefer the corny, total pop of "One In A Million". It's their most pop moment and it's great.

The group made a couple more records, 1985's "Rhythm Romance" and 2003's comeback record cryptically titled "61/49", but I never heard them. I'll keep a look out in the dollar bin.

MY LIFE AS A GRAF ARTIST

I've always had a love/hate relationship with hip hop. When I was in school and hip hop was first coming out, I loved it. I remember a great show at Andrew's Amphitheater headlined by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. This was before "White Lines" and their hit, "The Message" was still sort of underground. They brought four or five support acts one of which was a really young Run DMC. It was a cool outdoor show and I had been a big fan of the movie "Wild Style". At the time I would have been equally excited to meet someone from the Rock Steady Crew as someone from the Clash.

But I really hated all the kids in my school that were into hip hop. None of them really new about hip hop. We were in Hawaii and they would only refer to breaking, rapping and popping and locking. These kids were all assholes. They were the jocks and the cool kids and were always trying to fuck with me and my friends.

There is this totally revisionist view of history saying that there's always been some sort of connection between punk and hip hop. That's a bunch of bullshit. Maybe the Clash were into it and maybe some cool stuff happened in New York via Africa Bambaata. But for the most part, it was NOT cool. Where I lived, kids into popping and breaking developed out of the disco scene and they were constantly causing shit with punk kids. The stupid fights between disco fans and rock fans carried into fights with punk fans. In high school I would say that 90% of the violent attacks I experienced for being punk came from breaker shitheads. In fact, as an adult, at least half of the times I've had people do or say racist shit to me, it's almost hilarious how often it's a group of black teens listening to hip hop in their car or on a boom box (the other half of the time it seems to be homeless Vietnam Vets who seem to think I killed their buddy. Wish I had...) So, fuck it, I've always had a problem with hip hop.

The sad truth was that I did also love the idea of it. Musically, it was the most exciting and innovative thing to happen since hardcore and I loved the early overt political nature of the scene. I very quickly realized that I was never going to make hip hop music. Even more so than with punk, there was a feeling that while Asians weren't specifically excluded, it was an art form specifically for African Americans. That actually bothers me far less than kids hassling me for NOT wearing baggy pants. At least there was some sort of political agenda (of sorts) and not just self-centered kids being assholes. Yeah, in a way I do support strict dress codes for high schools. You don't get kids in China making fun of other kids for the way they dress.

Anyway, I was equally interested in graffiti as I was with the music. At first, I would just get glimpses of it via Futura 2000 with the Clash or movies like "Wild Style". I was only able to see this movie couple of times. Remember, these were the days before everyone had a VCR. You couldn't just pick up a movie you wanted to see at a shop. You would have to wait until it was playing somewhere and in Hawaii that was even more difficult.

I would go to the library and get any book they had about graffiti. Back then, there was nothing documented about the big wild style pieces. Any books were about Taki and the street taggers. Tagging was cool, but it really didn't appeal to me at first. I didn't really see the point. It kind of

looked messy and was just an ego trip. Of course, the ego trip was another problem I had with hip hop. But more on that later.

Long before I was into hip hop I was really into comic books. I would always try to draw super heroes or even reproduce stupid shit like the Wizard of Id or Ziggy just to see if I could draw it. I was really into this book that I think came out in the '70s called "How To Draw The Marvel Way". It was hugely important and I think it had a lot to do with my whole attitudes towards DIY punk in later years. The idea that these people knew how to make great comics and weren't hiding the info but were trying to pass it on was sort of heroic to me.

As I lost interest in superheroes and started getting into wild style graffiti (back then it was what we would call the big, elaborate pieces like the ones you would see on the side of New York subway trains) I started transferring tricks like shading styles, 3Ds and backgrounds from comic art into my graffiti. By the time I was in high school I was trying stuff out on the walls of the drainage ditches in my neighborhood.

My original tag was SALT (of the Earth). I liked that it was sort of poetic. But really, I picked it because I had come up with a really good "S". I doubt I'm the only person who made their name choice for such a ridiculous reason. After doing six or seven SALT's (including one a little to close to home that pissed off my stepdad) I decided that I really didn't like the religious implications. Since, like I said, I wasn't really into the ego trip and just liked making art, it didn't matter too much to me to change the name.

My next tag was GASM and it's the one I used the most. I was still interested in comic art but having moved past superheroes, I was then into stuff like Heavy Metal. Gasm was a really, really crap rip off of Gasm. I think there were a few magazines like that at the time. But the art was still pretty good and I liked the logo. It was like proto-air brush style. I figured nobody cared about that magazine anyway, so I stole the title and it became my tag.

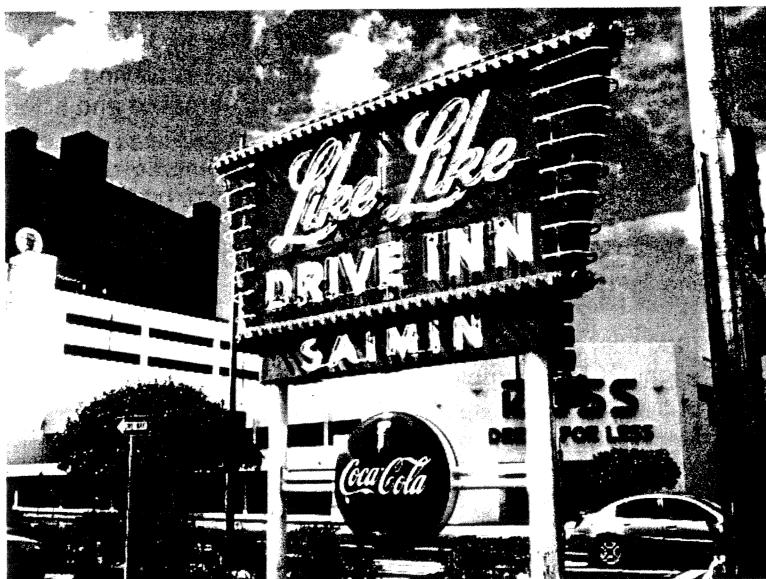
There was sort of an unwritten rule back then that no matter what your financial situation, you had to steal your paints. It was all based on the honor system, obviously, so I don't know how many people really stole the paint. I was terrified every time I went to Sears to get paint. I'll be honest, I stole paints a

lot. But I would be so nervous that I would just grab whatever was right in front of me and would not even look in my bag to see what I got until I was two hours down the road. That meant a lot of shitty colors. You can't really do much with grey primer. So the other colors I would buy. What can I say? I am all in favor of shoplifting from the corporate giants. But I'm just no good at it. I'm pretty scared.

I always went out of my way to try to keep the general elements of wild style graffiti while doing my own thing. One thing was that when fluorescent spray paint came out, I used it all the time. I even spray painted by Moserite guitar with the same paints I was using to do murals.

I think the peak of my graffiti life was when one of my pieces appeared in an early edition of the International Graffiti Times. Started by graf artists in New York, IGT was a fanzine of sorts entirely dedicated to covering the wild style graffiti scene. They mostly covered the ever changing Manhattan scene. I was a fan and submitted some photos I had taken of some of my pieces. I just did it for fun and didn't really expect anything. I was really happy when out of the blue they sent me the latest issue and one of my pictures was featured. It was so cool. Gasm in IGT!

There were some bad times too. A couple of times I got visited by the cops. It was really my own stupid fault. Some of the little kids in the neighborhood were really into my art and I found it super flattering. I had a sketch book where I would work out my ideas before painting them. I would give them some of these drawings. An irate parent found one and tried to connect me to the graffiti near our apartment complex. It was pretty scary knock on the door. But luckily I was the only person at home both times it happened. By the second time, I felt bad for the guy as he definitely felt put out by the crazy mother who apparently had been yelling at him all day to arrest me. The thing was, the graffiti nearby was an old Salt design. I



had long ago switched to Gasm, so they really had no way of connecting my current sketches to the graffiti. Since I denied I was Salt, I couldn't be touched.

By the time I was 18 I was losing interest in graffiti. I think part of it was that I was getting better at playing guitar and was more interested in being in a punk band. Plus, I was doing a fanzine called AOK and that was also taking up a lot of my free time. The fact that I had no allies in wild style in Hawaii was also frustrating. A cool new generation started up under the name M.I.A. (Masters In Art) but they primarily focused on small tags in every corner of the island. Hip hop seemed more and more about the ego trip to me. Especially the musicians seemed so greedy. With punk, there was at least a notion of art before profit. With hip hop they all seemed to just wanna get rich no matter what they had to do. I was done.

Those early IGTs were the real spirit of hip hop in its golden era. If anyone has any clues, I'd love to track them down again.

THE BIRTH OF EMO (ONE VERSION OF EVENTS)

First of all, let's all say it out loud, "Emo." Say it ten times in a row, "Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo. Emo." It's horrible and feels awful to say. We need to get that out of our system first and foremost. Sorry kids, they won. Emo exists despite all of our valiant efforts. So how did this all happen?

I can understand why nobody including anyone I mention in this rant, would want to discuss the issue. Half of the bands don't want to have anything to do with the term and certainly don't want to be considered its origins. The other half is living it and in that delicate unreality can't directly face the strident criticisms coming from all angles.

It's hard to say who the first emo band was. But it's pretty safe to say that all fingers point to DC. The mid-'80s were a totally nullifying time. Hardcore had been probably the biggest post-punk movement to still have some counter-cultural relevancy. A scene that was as controlled by the quintessence of musical structuralism as it was by a particularly American form of individualism, hardcore was a twine of contradictions racing to critical mass. While practically single-handedly saving the notion of underground music after the corporate takeover of first wave punk in the late '70s, bands like Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, Minor Threat, the Dead Kennedys, the Adolescents – they had all either split or were heading in a different trajectory by 1985. Hardcore itself was going through its second and third generations, each time seeming more and more like a novelty or revival rather than something of urgency.

A lot has been said about the violence of hardcore shows as being the reason for its downfall. It's certainly true that by the mid to late '80s the violence at shows in California and other major hubs were more formal with the advent of gangs, skinhead neo-ism and just a general allure to disturbed individuals. But violence was often what drew people to hardcore in the first place. With the possible exception of its first few months of existence, violence was an undeniable part of hardcore. You can blame it on OC punks. But the violence was something of inevitability and without it, may have never been able to gain so much momentum. In this case, danger itself was a tool and an aesthetic.

Needless to say, the violence of hardcore wasn't without its own contradictions. As our society dictates, the violence was particularly male. While it may be a sexist notion to say that only men are prone to that kind of brutality, the fact remains that this atmosphere was directly responsible for dwindling numbers of female participants. For most women, it wasn't very appealing to be in a hardcore band and it wasn't especially safe to be at a show. Idiotic movies like "Suburbia" only helped to reinforce that notion nationally.

Every movement has an elite. As pointed out by Jon Savage, it's that elite that starts and defines a movement only to have it eventually taken out of their control by growing public attention whether it's via the media or some sort of grassroots movement. Even in hardcore, there was something of an intellectual elite in most local scenes. For DC, that had meant a history of hands-on, Do-It-Yourself functionalism that found its logical extent in political activism. As that not-so-vicious circle goes, the political activism would then dictate methods and modes of DIY. The result was a scene that would challenge itself both on the question of violence as well as the idea that the intensity once found in hardcore could possibly, hopefully come from a new source.

One of the greatest experiments in this evolution was Rites Of Spring. Mixing the energy of hardcore with the melodic impulses of everyone from the Buzzcocks to the Beatles, the group exploded with arguably the most important record of the '80s. Stories of both band and audience members being brought to tears at concerts became accidental type. Further tales of the group shredding their guitars into splinters with

their intensity followed. By the time their one and only LP was released, expectations were high.

One thing that people have so disastrously tried to reproduce from this record is the lyrics. Poetic in some rudimentary way, Rites Of Spring never really used obvious or simplistic language. This is especially relevant as hardcore and punk in general had brought back attention to lyrics as an equal footing to the music. While punk and hardcore certainly had little if anything to do with the singer-songwriter tradition, there was a different kind of interest in lyrics as something more than just a rhythmic device or as a means of accessibility. There was a quest for honesty. While a lot of it turned out to be a façade, the idea that punk bands were singing the truth was as important as any radical musical idea.

Rites Of Spring were imagistic as well as, at the time, excruciatingly personal. Talking about inner suffering and pain that was more accessible than the distant and alienated suffering of the Stooges or the Germs, the songs are intelligent and almost an attack on the dumb-ing down of most hardcore of the time while also avoiding the self-destructive, bourgeois notions of doomed anti-heroes. But that's not to say that the group existed in a bubble. This lyrical approach had been developing for years in the DC hardcore scene. From the Teen Idles attempts to honestly capture teen angst to Minor Threats personal and sometimes vengeful rants to the vastly underrated, quasi-psychoanalytical Marginal Man, DC hardcore was always more interested in solving their own problems before making some attempt to solve the world's.

While most of the world wasn't aware of it until a year later, Rites of Spring would spearhead a movement that included groups like Beefeater, Embrace, Ignition, Grey Matter and that summer, their excitement and kinetic energy would spill over into what they called Revolution Summer. It's important to note the musical departure of these bands. While the energy and intensity was high, they for the most part shied away from the breakneck speeds of hardcore. Beefeater would be the only band that could even be somewhat construed as metal though even that was tempered with funk and even jazz that best reflected the multiculturalism of the city. The aesthetics that were largely associated with masculinity were being erased to great effect.

It was around this time that the evil term, *emo*, would first rear its frumpy head. I'll admit it. The first time I ever heard the term was when Ian MacKaye was denouncing it in Ink Disease fanzine. In a weird way, he accidentally helped to promote the idea thus labeling himself in the process. At the time, *emo* specifically referred to what was coming out of the DC scene especially the releases on Dischord Records. Obviously, it was a shortened version of the equally vile term "emotional hardcore". Blech.

It's here that I would refer back to what Jon Savage said in "England's Dreaming". The DC scene had worked hard to create something new and once it was born they would next lose control of it. The first step was labeling a movement that never wanted one. "Emo" is a bad enough label. But no label would have made them happy. Just like the Sex Pistols disliking the term "punk", "emo" was forced upon these groups against their will. The main difference was it wasn't the mainstream media working against them. It was their own audience. In a way, that's what makes it art. An artist creates something and once it's public, they no longer own it. It belongs to the public and the public's interpretations. For non-artist musicians, i.e. entertainers, it's the public's desires that come first with the "talent" trying to appease them. For any musician, it's something of a no win situation.

With the anti-emo movement developing before *emo* itself, the influence of Rites Of Spring and others was soon picked up in California. Two bands in particular, while not necessarily sounding like DC bands, were able to use the freedoms they had brought to hardcore in creating their own unique sound; San Diego's Pitchfork and then Los Angeles residents Jawbreaker.

Started by John Reis, Pitchfork started life as a melodic punk trio playing often with straight edge hardcore groups like Amenity. While Amenity probably owed more to LA based straight edge group Uniform Choice than to DC's Minor Threat, Pitchfork were seen as evolving out of straight edge in the same way Rites Of Spring did.

Jawbreaker perhaps had a less tangible relationship to what was happening in DC. Having as much to do with the later Husker Du recordings as Rites Of Spring, the group were still mining this area of non-hardcore, post-hardcore and personal, often overly romantic lyrics.

At the same time, Fugazi were just getting nationally noticed. With members of Rites Of Spring and Minor Threat, they were initially thought of something as a super group. The arrival of their debut 12" made a huge impact on this young scene developing nationwide. Adding reggae and dub rhythms to even more pronounced melodic tunes, the group were also able

to dabble in the avant-garde experimenting with sound and texture as much as actual musical arrangement.

For both Pitchfork and Jawbreaker, this meant new freedoms. By the time Pitchfork recorded their one and only LP they were focusing equally on the dynamics of a broader variety of rhythmic structures as well as textures and guitar electronic sounds. Lyrically, they had only vaguely kept the personal elements focusing more on an imagistic poetry almost entirely metaphorical and open to wide interpretation. Pitchfork would even be the opening act for Fugazi's West Coast dates on their second US tour.

Jawbreaker were able to take a more subtle element of Fugazi's music, the influence of '60s groups like Creation, and were able to make small musical acknowledgements of pop music. While sometimes stopping just short of a cliché, the result was an often nostalgic feel while also seeming fresh and unique.

To say that Pitchfork or Jawbreaker entirely owe their legacies to the DC scene would be ridiculous. There were a lot of other things going on, many other influences and lots of ideas looking for vehicles. But the music of groups like Rites Of Spring was such a release from the strictness of hardcore, it couldn't help but have a joyous impact on anyone looking for that same escape route.

Fugazi had already done one US tour by the time the first 12" was released. By the time they were out supporting their first LP, "Repeater", they were playing to thousand plus audiences regularly. Suddenly, that initial elite had no control over this new musical movement. In DC there was even some resentment at West Coast groups like Fuel, heavily influenced by Fugazi. It was a desperate attempt by certain DC scenesters to keep something that was no longer theirs to give away.

It is important to note that Pitchfork and Jawbreaker would head in two different directions each in their own way becoming the two very different definitions people seem to have for emo. Pitchfork broke up with Rick and John coming back with the group Drive Like Jehu. Less and less interested in melody and more fascinated with experimentation, the group took their Southern California version of post-punk into an area of guitar heavy, non-metal, avant-garde aggression to its limits influencing a thousand bands trying but never reaching such self-conscious heights.

For Jawbreaker, the group were able to make some of the world's greatest music by largely sticking to their original charter, finding melody wherever they could while charging into each song with the same anxious excitement of early hardcore groups. In a way they were playing pop music though nobody would ever confuse them with Abba or Cheap Trick.

Since then, more and more diluted versions of Pitchfork and Jawbreaker keep popping up. With each new watered down version, there is an equal amount of media hype. It's the same all over. New jack no wave bands are largely an insult to groups like Teenage Jesus or DNA. Clash, Damned and Sex Pistols rip offs are just embarrassing. The fact that there are bands now happy to call themselves emo says it all.

Emo is here, friends. It has arrived. In fact, as hard as it is to believe that it might have ever been hip, it's already passé. Like punk rock, no wave, ska or whatever, context is everything and as I write this in 2006 it's just another meaningless media term.

THE BIRTH OF EMO (ANOTHER VIEW)

Where did things go wrong? How did hardcore get soft? How did we lose our way? What started this downward spiral?

One band is really the proto-emo group that, like the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, the Stooges and the MC5 preceded and influenced a whole generation. That group is U2.

Fuck those guys, right? I mean, seriously, did you see U2 with fucking Green Day on Monday Night Football? What was that all about? Why the hell was I watching Monday Night Football? I hate that shit. Being sick and often too exhausted to move leaves you sometimes watching some really dumb stuff.

But it's true. Most of us didn't really know why Minor Threat split up. Apparently, the singer wanted to keep doing what they were doing and the band wanted their sound to evolve away from hardcore. The next batch of songs that, thankfully, never materialized were in the U2 vein with chimy guitars and everything.

What a lot of us do remember is how excited we were to buy "New Wind". After "The Crew" and "Walk Together, Rock Together", expectations were high for a new 7 Seconds LP. Plus, most of us knew that they had done some more recording at Inner Ear with Ian. But between the DC recording session and the rest of the album, 7 Seconds discovered U2 and the result was a generally weak pop record that at the time was by far their worst release. They always did wear their influences on their sleeves and talked up how much they liked U2 in fanzine interviews.

What is the deal with U2? Even I fell for the first couple of albums. Looking back, I guess I can sort of enjoy them musically. But, fuck, those lyrics suddenly seem like the ultimate emo prototypes. My first encounter with U2 was a half page blurb about them in Trouser Press. They started off as a punk band and quickly were moving away from dogmatic politics, all politics really, wanting to do something more original. When their first album, "Boy", came out in the States, I bought it immediately.

I think everyone was looking for something newer than hardcore. A lot of underground music was getting weirder and interesting. But it never had the populist feel of the Clash or even the Ramones. U2 seemed new and exciting. They certainly had a punk sensibility at the start, but also had much more interesting guitar playing. It was perfect for anyone not patient enough to wait for Rites of Spring to come around.

As a depressed teen facing a world of hate (hey, that's how I felt) U2 and their vaguely goth influenced poetic lyrics seemed, I dunno, smart... Well, not that the Clash or Black Flag weren't smart. You just didn't get the impression from "White Riot" or "White Minority" that either band read books. Songs like "Shadows and Tall Trees" sounded like the group at least wanted you to think they read books. Considering punk and post-punk in America in the '80s was largely a student affair that was sort of appealing.

The one thing I was never able to entirely figure out was why U2 became so influential to the straight edge bands. You have to remember that this was before Rites of Spring and the whole Revolution Summer so while some of those bands were clearly listening to U2, you could say that they were the influence. I'm going to have to assume that it was because of the intense communication between straight bands, fanzines and fans. It would stand to reason that if Minor Threat and 7 Seconds were into U2, that might have influenced other groups.

Emo does come down to a sort of change in values. The straight edge kids split into the macho metal shit that kept mutating ultimately having offspring like the hardline scene. The other half of the split tried to get deep which is always a dangerous and often embarrassing adventure in pop music. You can't say much in 12 lines and you can't put Baudelaire to garage music. But that's emo.

Emo has continued to evolve. At first they were the straight edge kids that started smoking. Then they got a little goth. Then they went rock with the help of U2's evolving career. To get nerdy for a moment, there's a guitar trick that was capitalized on with the first three U2 records. It involves playing the D and G strings only. The D remains open while you pick out a major scale on the G. You play the two strings simultaneously. This trick (and all guitar playing is essentially trickery) was popularized by the Edge and now you can't find an emo record without it.

But it's early U2 lyrics that have so much to do with emo. People thought they were smart so people accepted their premise; they may have been politically aware, but they wanted to write about other things. Of course, this allowed them to be totally politically ambiguous while appealing to the broadest student audience. Emo bands have been copying this motif ever since.



MAGAZINES LIVE

Dialysis is boring. It's really boring. I've gotten to the point where I stay up late just so I'll be tired enough to sleep through the whole session. I don't know. I can't do it anymore. I wind up just tired and bored.

Kelly had bought me a portable DVD player for Xmas. But I've already managed to somehow break it. There are TVs there, but we have to share them with other patients which means hours of "Walker Texas Ranger". What is the deal with that show? Can Walker time travel? It seems like every so often, his black partner vanishes and he travels back to the old west.

Anyway, I try to read books but I can't. It's like I'm just too tired to read anything that needs serious concentration. So, magazines are my only solution. I tried to read total crap... Entertainment Weekly... In Style... you know, crap. But it's all just too fucking stupid. I can't read that stuff. It's painful.

So here are the magazines I love. Magazines aren't dead. There are still good magazines in this world. I don't know what really unites all of these magazines other than they are all very intelligent. The people that write for these magazines are smart and don't feel compelled to dumb down their content.

Don't get me wrong. I understand the dire state of journalism in the world and how the notion that blogs and people using camera phones are becoming a real source of information should make any thinking person want to cry. I've even tried to watch CNN, World News Now and even BBC sets me down. I fucking love PBS and even NPR. But seriously; people need to start reading again and magazines don't have to be either totally frivolous or pure commodity.

Giant Robot – I guess it's no surprise that I love Giant Robot. I'd love it even if I didn't know Eric and Martin and wasn't an occasional contributor. I used to read stuff like A Magazine and later Yolk. As an Asian American I've always sort of yearned for some sort of band or magazine or something that reflected that experience. I never would have guessed how really satisfying it would be to find Giant Robot. Every issue is totally interesting to me. I relate to so much of it and the rest I find intriguing. Aside from the Asian-American content, I think Giant Robot is remarkable in that it's really the only publication I can think of that has graduated to the glossies with real ads while still maintaining the feel of a fanzine by the often understated but always present personality of the writing. It manages to feel casual without entirely giving itself over to the conversational style of most zines. It's a writing form that had to develop organically merging the inertia of fanzines with learned technique.

Believer, The – Sometimes I think this magazine is really... I dunno... uppie-dom? The new middle class liberals? It's like reading the New Yorker or something. But no, it's better than that. The book reviews are great and when they do have a solid interview, like Eric Bogosian or contributions from Nick Hornby, Fred Armisen or the great Michelle Tea... It's sort of a guilty pleasure. It's smart if a little bourgeoisie at times. But the smart rarely feels condescending. It's more lateral. When the Believer does fail it's because it mistakes its familiarity with its audience who just might be a little further to the left while still taking pleasure in the clever if at times quaint writing.

Seed – I used to love Omni when I was a kid. It seems sort of corny now. Seed is the Giant Robot of science nerds. It's smart in content and style and even though I may think String Theory is a bunch of bullshit, there's so much great information in every issue. Editor Adam Bly seems like a nerd. Maybe a dork. But he's come up with something that just might make science cool again. The death of science magazines came with the death of pop science. For a while, wingnut pseudo-science seemed like the only stuff being committed to print. Either that or there was the borderline academic, extremely broad (re. "middle class") lessons in space and nature. Seed is strangely hip, revealing and analytical without seeming unrealistically extreme. Not that there isn't room in this world for books on crypto-zoology or whatever. But it's actually a relief that Seed is neither Fortean Times nor Scientific American.

Sight And Sound – It's amazing that there are so many totally unreadable film magazines. Not even film magazines... Movie magazines... It's awful. Is there a single regular magazine in the States that covers film in an even lightly intelligent way? I can't think of one. You don't find cover stories on Bunuel or Godard in the states. No, you have to look elsewhere and BFI's "international film magazine" is the most consistently interesting publication. It's really the best overviews of modern relevant cinema with great features as well. It's one of the most important cultural magazines in existence. It's

funny that it took the Brits to write the only really important overview of the current state of American indie film while also giving a rare modern analysis of American culture and how our aesthetic nostalgia is nothing but a reminder that we've killed off our metaphors with nothing new to discover.

Wire – Fuck no, I have no idea what they're talking about half of the time. It's such insanity. Do they ever just totally make shit up? Still, I find this magazine totally challenging covering all kinds of music that I'm interested in. Its music purely as art and taken seriously. The fact that it's genuinely smart makes the whole premise totally convincing. There are problems. Some of the writers are totally full of themselves. You feel like you did with those early Bad Religion records where they are writing about electronic blips and bleeps with thesaurus firm in hand. It can be so fucking pretentious. But they're the only ones regularly covering new and avant-garde music. I'd rather a music magazine strive for intelligent analysis and new descriptive terms for sometimes overused ideas as opposed to continually dumbing itself down as is the case with 99% of all stateside music publications. The Wire is as much an art magazine as it is about music. You approach it to be challenged and not merely entertained.

Jazz Times – The only magazine talking intelligently about jazz anymore is Jazz Times. There's a lot of stuff I have no interest in. But it's got regular contributions from Nat Hentoff and Gary Giddins and they don't shy away from the experimental stuff from Cecil Taylor to John Zorn. Even the way they cover sorta mundane material like Wynton Marsalis is interesting. Their "Overdue Ovation" section is always interesting.

BARRY BONDS

Fuck everybody! Call me a hypocrite!!! Bonds broke the record and all you babies can suck it!!!! The record is in the Bay and it's the best news I've heard in a while!!! Barry Bonds is the undisputed champ and tough shit if you can't handle it.

I was so, so happy that Aaron was able to congratulate Bonds the way he did. I was actually starting to get a little annoyed by the coverage of Aaron's refusal to attend these last few games. But I think the message made it all okay. Well, okay for me, anyway. Even Jesse Jackson said some pretty nice things.

I guess I think about Bonds in the same way I think about someone like, say, James Hetfield. His politics suck. He probably kinda sucks as a person. But, fuck, I love "Ride The Lightning" and that's no lie. Judging athletes politically or ideologically or personally is as ridiculous as making life decisions based on lyrics by Metallica. This is just my opinion, of course, and it might be influenced by the fact that I just watched the first season DVD of "Metalocalypse". Hearing those SF fans chanting "Bar-REE" I really wish I was back home.

Incidentally, even though I agree that steroids are dangerous, I still don't think they make that much of a difference. Obviously, baseball fans don't really care. Conseco's book points out that as many as 85% of all major league players are on steroids, it's covered like mad in the media and baseball is STILL setting attendance records this year. People don't give a shit about steroids. They just like to "boo" Bonds. I'll bet that will change next year with whatever team he gets traded to. Do you think Twins fans are gonna "boo" if he's their new home run hitting DH? Besides, if even conservative estimates say that maybe 70% of all players are on steroids and they make such a big difference, why aren't 70% of all players playing at Bonds's level?

I could be wrong, and I usually am, but I have a feeling that rather than crack down on steroid use (it's never gonna happen) the players will just become more and more powerful as will their union. Eventually they will find new "safe" steroids that will be legal under new baseball guidelines. They probably won't even call them steroids (though that's what they will be). They'll be called "developmental fibrons" or "natural growth enhancers" or something like that. That way athletes will continue to play ball into their 50s, growing into stranger and stranger shapes. Everybody will get into Cooperstown and everyone will be happy... except maybe Conseco. I guess I love baseball because it's turning into science fiction.

Oh, and can you believe that Barry Zito got a hit? Now THAT was surprising...

WHEN PUNKS BECOME TEACHERS...

I am really out of the loop. Every so often, I make a half assed effort to find out what people I knew from the old Hawaii, '80s hardcore scene are up to. There's an on-line group you can join if you were part of the '80s punk scene in Hawaii and get the latest news and chat with the folks from

back then. I had written a few years ago about this girl Bronzy who sort of scared me at the time. I was friends with her sister, Lani, and in more recent times had thought they had both turned out pretty nice. I liked reading about what they were up to.

I had recently heard from Lani and another old friend, Amanda, and it got me interested in reading up on the haps. Holy crap! Nobody knew it, but it turns out that Bronzy had been addicted to meth for who knows how long (which along with Prozac and the other meds she was on for depression, Bipolar disorder and anxiety was probably brutal) all the while teaching elementary school at Ka elepulu. She got busted when she tried to pick up a delivery of 989 MDMA tabs and 2 pounds of coke!

To me, the thing that is the most fucked about this situation is that she clearly has some serious problems and doesn't have control over her life. But to deal with it, they might send her to prison for up to 40 years. Sounds like she'll defo have to do some time. But will this help with her addiction or make her even more fucked? This is certainly bad news for her kids not to mention her students as all indications show that she was actually a good teacher.

It's so grim. When I think back about what I had written about her and the other things she was rumored to have done back in the day, I wonder how long she's needed help and nobody had any way of knowing. There's just no way to know.

FESTIVUS 2005 – J CHURCH / URCHIN TOUR #3

November 16th – Jackson, MS

We picked up the Urchin at Ben's place relatively early. They had a show the night before at Beerland. But I was working. I figure I'll be seeing them plenty anyway.

The drive from Austin to Jackson is ass. We should have left earlier, like the night before. Maybe we should have had a show in Houston to break up the drive. Uh, sometimes I wish we lived on the East Coast where you can tour endlessly with short drives.

Even though we're late, it turns out we're really only late for the soundcheck. Billy who set up the show is really cool. I've never met him in person, but he's written to us a few times in the past. His girlfriend, Chrissy, is really nice too. The Red Room is a decent club with a bar that sort of reminds me of a nice version of this club in North Beach we used to play called like Morty's or something.

Tonight is my first time checking out Bent Outta Shape. Wow. I don't know why I was under the impression that they were all Thrash-a-mundo. But they're quite poppy with lots of good tunes. They're one of those bands that get up, rock out, and then all find neutral corners of the club. I think they're having fun. But I don't want to assume.

The Urchin go down really well. We went out of our way to have some really fun shows on this tour so it should all be very Snuffy Smiles friendly. Yoichi is along for the tour (as well as Tomo from I Excuse and Yusuke from Blotto) so we want to make sure they all have a good experience. They've always been great to us over in Japan.

Toys That Kill are great. Paddy from D4 is sitting in with them on this trip and that means a lot more jamming than usual. It's cool. They even sort of evolve this one spontaneous thing into a Joy Division song. It's the loosest I've ever seen them and it's great.

That night goes crazy as all the bands are crashing out at Billy and Chrissy's. Everyone seems to be in various stages of wasted-ness. But nobody is as konked out as Billy. I'm almost worried about him for a moment. But then I see him bop around, pale as death, looking for a place to crash. I go with Chrissy to a 24-hour supermarket to get away from the ruckus and we have a nice chat about life while buying snacks and crap for the hordes back at the house. She even gives me one of her paintings. I had said before the tour that one of the things I wanted to look for was little pieces of original art and she's the first person to hook me up!

November 17th – Pensacola, FL

We've always had bad luck with this part of the world. But we've also never played Sluggo's. It's starting off good, as we are now two for two with the club providing some sort of vegan friendly meal. Chili is good especially when I soak it in Tabasco. Mmmm cornbread too. I even had a glass of wine. Shit, this is a punk bar and I'm drinking merlot. Does that make me a dick?

Our dearests from San Diego, Vena Cava, are up first tonight. I feel like we are two groups of pioneers that keep randomly encountering each other on the prairie. I think this is the third time we've played with them in the third different state. I don't think we've ever even played with them in Austin.

The rest of the night is something of a chaotic blur as there was a

bit of drinking and there were a lot of bands. Bent Outta Shape, The Urchin, This Bike Is A Pipe Bomb, Sexy, Blood Bath and Beyond, Toys That Kill. I barely remember playing. This show is another one that with all that known talent was won by the Urchin. They were the tightest band of the night and they really won the crowd over. It was great to see people rockin' to them. Tonight's crowd was even more rocking than last night. God, I hope they're having fun.

November 18th – Gainesville, FL

Ah, festivals. I sort of hate them. I find myself mostly just wandering around with people I only vaguely know seeing bands play short sets to much too large audiences. It's hot, I'm tired and everything is expensive. No way was I looking forward to having two days off at the Fest. Hmmm... I actually had a great time.

First of all, a lot more people showed up than I expected. Mike McKee came down and became my partner in crime. David Hayes even flew out. Can you believe it? Hayes was here! I really miss Floyd too so that was cool getting to hang a bit with him.

I spent a lot of day one just wandering around and catching up with people. I got to see Dillinger Four who, while definitely wasted, were not nearly as wasted as the last time I saw them. PJ from Grabass has been cool enough offer his digs as a place for us to crash the whole weekend. I have a feeling it's gonna be band camp, so I find a neutral corner and snore myself into oblivion.

November 19th – Gainesville, FL

Me and Mike McKee got up relatively early and checked out the acoustic show happening at some house. Not the kind of house party I was expecting, there was a nice outdoor stage with 100 kids and free bar-b-que (maybe it wasn't free. I didn't really investigate).

We make our way back to the downtown area where most of the shows are happening just in time to catch Pink Razors. Good shit. I can see why people say they're like a more punk version of Superchunk. They've got the hooks and the vocals. I wonder if their name has anything to do with the Chixdiggit record or vice-versa.

Finally we get to play. All these bands, and I only feel anxious to get on stage. There's something weird about being in that tour mode where every band you see just adds to your own anxiety until you actually get up and play. It's not your typical competition thing. It's true that whenever we are an opening band for someone, I have a weird desire to try and blow them off the stage. But with these really big shows, it feels more like I'm part of a big bowling league and it's taking forever to get to be my turn. We have a lot of fun at the Common Grounds. We actually had a great show at this venue years and years ago when it was called the Covered Dish. After we're done, the craziness really starts. Radon do a reunion gig and are totally amazing. I've known these guys forever and I just can't believe they're playing. Every song sounds great and the packed house seems to know every word. This is the best way to see them.

When they're done we run over to another gynormous venue to catch Paint It Black. They were fucking amazing. I've never seen them before and I was really blown away. I dig both of those Jade Tree records. But now that I've seen them live I don't know if I can go back. Ferocious hardcore that you associate with East Coast bands. I should say that they were one of the main bands that I was looking forward to seeing at the Fest and they did not disappoint. I'll say it again: ferocious.

Having said all that, best band of the night was Ted Leo and the Pharmacists. Seriously, this was the best time I'd ever seen them. I've always loved Ted's songs and his voice. Plus he's a great guitar player. I really admire the guy. The band has always been fun. But tonight's show was especially powerful all the way down to the SLF cover at the end. Everything just seems to be clicking for them at the moment. They are totally solid and suddenly seem larger than life. It's weird. I've known Ted forever. It's crazy to connect the guy I've known for years with the guy onstage. The he pops off stage and he's same old Ted that I've known and loved.

November 20th – Gainesville, FL

McKee is heading home today, so I'm on my own. I make it over to the Common Grounds for the day show featuring mostly lo-fi, singer-songwriter stuff. I get to see Erin Tobey, which is really why I got up so early. She has a cool guitar technique and I like her little voice. Plus, she just writes such good songs. Before I even knew she made music, I was checking out her zine. It's not a surprise that the music she makes is so personal and unique.

There's a crazy house party going on with a bunch of bands I wanna see. Lefty Lucy are a cool group that we met at a house party in

Milwaukee a little while back. They put on a good show with lots of great pop songs. They sort of remind me of a much punkier Tiger Trap or something. I don't know if that's what they're going for. But it comes out nice.

Another member of Yusuke's band, Blotto, is over for the fest. Recruiting Mole from the Urchin and Tomo on drums, they put together a brief set of Blotto songs to play at the party. It's very cool to see people willing to take such chances and go to such great lengths just to play to the cool party people. It was all very much in the spirit of the Fest.

We make it back for another big show with Dillinger Four opening. They're not looking too good. They readily admit that they are way too hung over to play. The result is that they seem to be really concentrating. Even though it doesn't make for as fun of a show, it sounds great. None More Black play after them and I'm not really into it. I dunno. It's just rock music and I'd just as soon listen to BTO or whatever. I'm talking with Bill Florio when somebody sneaks up behind him and dumps a garbage can over his head. Turns out it was one of the

guys from Against Me. But he sneaks off before anyone can do anything. Seems pretty cowardly but I don't really think much of that band anyway. There's something really fake about them that I can't put my finger on. The Soviettes are next. I like 'em. I mostly like Annie's songs. The crowd sucks as I think they've just been waiting for the headliners.

Anyway, enough of the big rock club. I split and go check out the hardcore show with Bury the Living who are amazing as always and our fellow Austin-ites, Army Of Jesus. Oh, much more fun. A really great atmosphere. Pretty much no stage in a small hall. Friendly pit. It's like a really old style hardcore show.

Afterwards I go with Mike from the Observers and Dave from Drunken Boat (amongst other things) to a vegan café. Why does all the food at the hippy vegan coffee shops have to have such stupid names? No wonder I hate these places. I get the Indiana Jones and the TEMPEH of Doom and a salad with a name so stupid I can't remember. Over greens and fermented soy, we decide to do some recording together back in Austin. I guess they're riding back with Toys That Kill and will be around for a few days. Time to call Stan and see what his schedule is like. Perhaps a new band is born at the Fest.

November 21st – Atlanta, GA

The last time we were here we played a shameful, shameful show. It was so bad. I don't know what the hell happened. There was a good crowd. It was a nice club. I just couldn't get anything going. I couldn't sing that night to save my life. Yeah, yeah, I can't really sing anyway. But that night was especially bad. Yikes. After a string of great shows in Atlanta we've had two or three stinkers in a row.

Man, there's just nothing to eat around here. It must be some sort of holiday because everything is closed. We drive forever to eat some pretty fire Chinese food. It really took the life out from under me.

We get back in time to see the amazing Black Cougar Shock Jnit. I love these guys and missed them at the Fest. Just too much shit all happening at once. So I was really happy to find out that we were playing with them in their hometown. They were as powerful live as you would

imagine. Two guitars really work for them. This bar is really cool. The room where the bands play is nice and cozy.

It's Monday. It's not packed. But it's the best time we've had in Atlanta in forever. I'm feeling a lot better about this place.

November 22nd – Chattanooga, TN

I needed some alone time so while the rest of the entourage went to a somewhat pricey café for breakfast, I snuck out to a pizza place. A little

privacy can go a long way and it was the cleanest bathroom of the entire tour.

We still manage to get to Ziggy's hours and hours before we need to be there. Nothing to do? We eat again. This place was great. After walking around in the cold, looking at the old bridges, we find a cool coffee shop diner. It's nice just to chill out and I get a chance to really chat with Maya, Ben's significant other who we've picked up for the rest of the trip.

There are two shows tonight and ours

is the early one

at the bar. Well, it's not really at the bar. It's in this big, graffiti covered, empty room behind the bar. It's crazy. Yoichi says he likes it because it's like a European squat show. Yup. The show is total madness with loads of people turning up.

Lots of great bands tonight including a great set from Sexy who are at their best. They've had some drinks but they've got it together. They're tight as hell and every song is a high-speed pop miracle. The crowd goes equally nuts for the Urchin as this must be their best show of the tour. Even we go down really great ending with our Misfits cover and Mole on bass.

After our show ends, there's a house party with some of the other bands from the Fest. I couldn't hang out for long in the basement because my allergies were going crazy from the dust. So I don't know all the bands that played. I wanna say Lefty Lucy, maybe Bent Outta Shape, the Modern Machines... I'm sure others played too. It was a crazy scene and I was really, really not up for the overnight drive that we had.

November 23rd – Denton, TX

What the fuck are we doing? We're playing a college town right before Thanksgiving. Nobody is here. Nobody we know is around. Oh well. The club is really nice actually and the people working the show are really cool. Hailey's? I spent a lot of time walking back and forth to the coffee shop. I was starting to feel my legs get wobbly from the overnight drive and just general fatigue. Shit, I had to make it back to Austin tonight as well.

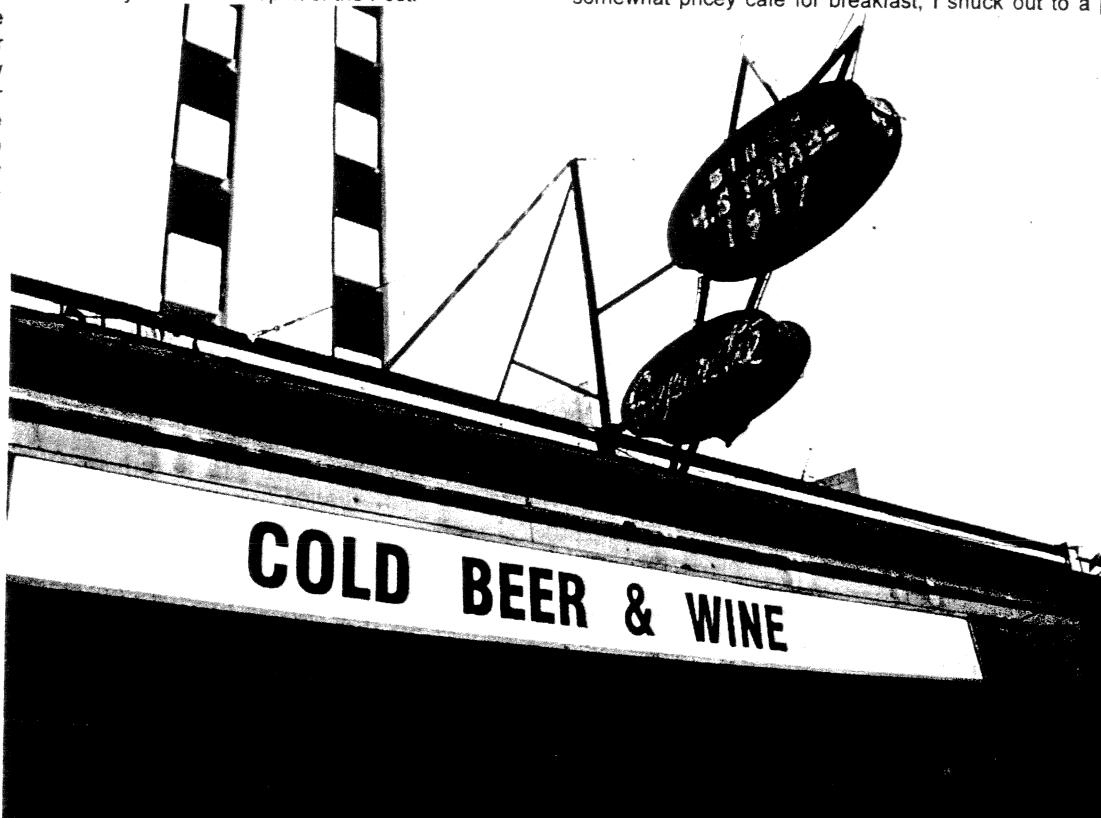
The show isn't even half full, but it's fun anyway. I say my goodbyes to the Japanese crew and head to the Greyhound station. Fuck it. I need to be home for work. I get the first bus outta there and wake up with the Austin sun burning my eyes out. None of the buses are running so I wind up walking half the way. Hours later I make it back home only to find out I don't need to work after all. Fuck me.

PHOTOS

Like Like Drive-In

The basement I grew up in

Watanabe's Market



Sexy Sadie

You made a fool of me

You made a fool of me

Sexy Sadie what have you done?

Sexy Sadie you broke the rules

You laid it down for all to see

You laid it down for all to see

Sexy Sadie you broke the rules

One sunny day the world was waiting for a lover

She came along to turn on everyone

Sexy Sadie the greatest of them all

Sexy Sadie how did you know?

The world was waiting just for you

The world was waiting just for you

Sexy Sadie how did you know?

Sexy Sadie you'll get yours yet

However big you think you are

However big you think you are

Sexy Sadie you'll get yours yet

We gave her everything we owned

Just to sit at her table

Just a smile would lighten everything

Sexy Sadie she's the latest and the greatest

Of them all

This is an interview I did for my book, "Let The Tribe Increase". Hammy and Semi were the original drummer and singer for the amazing Instigators. Hammy would go on to also be in Civilised Society and Sore Throat as well as label head of Peaceville.

Lance - How did you get into punk rock?

Hammy - When the Sex Pistols "happened" in 1976 the impact in the UK was enormous. I was only 11 at the time, but I can remember loving them and what they were doing. At 12 or 13 I was wearing punk badges and calling myself a "punk" so I guess I was in the right place at roughly the right time.

Semi - A difficult question considering it was over 25 years ago. I was about 14 and was on my holidays. We went to the kids disco and in between Kool and the Gang and "Summer Loving" (Grease) the dance floor cleared and this one guy started to dance around like a nutter to "Friggin' in the Riggin", that started me off.

Lance - What made you want to start a band?

Hammy - I guess it was a love of music; I took drum lessons at school and then played once for the school brass band. I couldn't play though and I suppose punk was easier to pull off so I looked to be in a punk band.

Semi - We used to make drums out of old cake tins with cling film and sticky tape and pretend we were in a band. It was always something I wanted to do; I always liked to sing and would do so at every opportunity.

Lance - How did you all meet and when was that?

Hammy - I met the guitarist (Simon) Mooney when he started high school the year after I did (1978-ish). He was a punk into the Pistols and his schoolmates lived across the street from me so we started to be the "school punks". We then met another emerging punk at school called Semi (Simon Bridgewater) and we formed the band.

Semi - Me Hammy, Mooney and TAB the original instigators all went to school together. Mooney and Hammy instigated (excuse the pun) the band and asked me if I wanted to sing. I went down to Hammy's house in the school lunch break and auditioned to Army Life by the exploited, that was it, I was an instigator!!

Lance - What made you choose the name Instigators?

Hammy - A local, much revered punk called Perv went up to Mooney one day and said "I hear you've formed a punk band, you can use the name of my old band, Instigators, if you want". We were so impressed and scared that we immediately agreed. Then when Crass's single came out proclaiming "Shaved Women - Instigators" we knew we'd got a good name.

Semi - According to Hammy and Mooney it was a guy called Ritchie Calvert a punk from nearby Batley who thought up the name.

Lance - What previous bands had you been in or was it your first?

Hammy - The first, it was like being in several bands though as we progressed and settled on our third bass player TAB (Simon Elsey) we also had another guitarist, RAMMY, for a while and two other vocalists, DAZ DEAN and BARBARA DRYE. So when we settled with the single / album line up it was the band for real.

Semi - It was my first and last band.

Lance - How did you find out about Crass and anarcho punk?

Hammy - In Leeds, a city close by, I noticed that some of the older punks had started wearing Nazi style armbands with this strange symbol on them. I thought it had to be some skinhead band. Then I saw "Feeding of the 5000" and the cover scared me silly and when I read the text it was like hearing a new voice for the first time. Someone was communicating to me, a disillusioned young punk with no future. There was an address to write to and I sent letters off, each time getting a handwritten reply by a band member along with 5 or 6 badges and lots of flyers and literature. My life was set in stone from then on, I would be a Crass punk. At 16 I became vegetarian and tasted my last meat.

Semi - I remembered a friend buying the "Feeding of the 5000". To be honest I didn't like it. I like flowing music. I bought the Flux of Pink Indians "Tube Disaster" and then the Subhumans' "Demolition War" EP. They influenced my vocal style and my outlook on life in general.

Lance - What were the early gigs like? Who were you playing with?

Hammy - The really early gigs were all in youth clubs, playing (badly) to the same 12 people who came to every show. They were mainly headline affairs; our first REAL show was supporting FLUX OF PINK INDIANS and THE SYSTEM in Huddersfield. Two bands I absolutely adored. We weren't that good, but we went down amazingly well and were heroes to our mates.

Semi - The first real gig we played was with the Flux of Pink Indians and The System in Huddersfield. It was over and done with in no time. I haven't really any recollection of it now apart from not liking our sound. On my 18th birthday we played in Wolverhampton with the Mob. They were the tightest musicians I had ever heard (apart from the Subhumans.)

Lance - How involved were you with the anarcho scene at the time?

Hammy - We weren't really, it was just that I'd write to all these Crass and Spiderleg label bands and we all communicated with each other, then we started playing gigs together and my lyrics would get more and more political. The rest of the band didn't really like Crass at all, so I always felt like the odd one out for being an anarcho type.

Semi - I never really thought about it much. I was heavily into animal rights from listening to Flux and used to go on protest marches and the like with Hammy and a couple of members of Chumbawamba. I remember getting dragged out of Boots the chemist after protesting against the testing of cosmetics on animals.

Lance - Did you feel part of the anarcho scene?

Hammy - At the time I felt like a small child who was being treated kindly by these big pop stars. It was odd to get calls from people who's records you were adoring and who's name you had painted on your jacket. I couldn't be a "fan" anymore but we weren't old enough to be scene movers.

Semi - Very much so, there was a buzz at the concerts and you got to know people. There were some really bad bands around yet they gave 100% and that's all you can ask for.

Lance - How did you hook up with Bluurg? What made you decide to release a record with them?

Hammy - Well the Subhumans started on Spiderleg Records, Flux's label, and I had been to stay with Flux and we'd done some gigs with them and all got on well, so when Subhumans record came out Flux asked us to support the Subhumans. I was sure we were getting close to being asked by Spiderleg ourselves, but after seeing us a few times supporting them, Dick and the boys loved us and I think we were amusing young lads, so they offered us a single. At the time I was almost disappointed to not get on Spiderleg as it was only once removed from Crass records and not twice, but after "working" with the Subhumans and Dick in particular we soon had a great relationship and were truly overjoyed to be close to such a talented bunch of people.

Semi - We supported them in Bradford. We were back stage after our set and Dick Subhuman came back and said in a West Country accent, "That was Facking Brilliant" so we did the single ("The Blood Is On Your Hands") and the album ("Nobody Listens Anymore")

soon after that.

Lance - What was it like recording that first 7"?

Hammy - We recorded it twice. Once in Warminster at the place the Subhumans or someone had used. We were exhausted from the travel had little time and hated the engineer. It came out sounding awful. Very luckily for us, Dick had the foresight and the balls to pay to record it again, this time we went back to where we'd recorded 2 tracks for the Pax compilation "Bollox to the Gonads" - Woodlands in Normanton and this being closer and also a brand new studio it was great and we did an enormously improved job which ended up as the first single. We always went to Woodlands after that, great studio, great engineer.

Semi - Exciting, We went to stay with Bruce Subhuman in Shropshire and recorded it in a weekend. The Engineer made a balls of the tape so we re-recorded it at the Woodlands Studio in nearby Normanton (I think). If not it would have been Lion Studio's in Leeds.

Lance - How did you feel about the record at the time? What was the response like?

Hammy - It went straight into the top 5 UK indie charts. We opened up our music papers as usual and there we were in the chart. It was a surreal and amazing feeling. The response from everywhere was superb. It was a great time.

Semi - Mixed Feelings really, you always want to release your first single but it's a bit of an anti climax when it happens. It got to No 18 in the indie charts and stayed there for about 5 weeks (Don't quote me on that though).

Lance - How did you get into animal rights?

Hammy - Through seeing mindless cruelty on a regular basis in day to day life and then reading Crass and Flux record sleeves, the whole thing hit home and left a huge impact and I still feel exactly the same.

Lance - Did you tour much?

Hammy - Yes, we played all the time, we had shows nearly every week



of the year and the local clubs would always call us to support any band that was playing who didn't bring a support act with them, so we got to support some really diverse bands like the Addicts and Toy Dolls as well as our regular spots with Flux, Chumbawamba, Subhumans, Antisect and the like.

Semi - Seemed to do at the time. We would play locally in the early days supporting bands like the Exploited, Toy Dolls and other main stream punk bands. I worked full time in a foldaway bed factory and it was difficult at the time. Tab worked also as a joiner, Hammy had a paper round and Mooney had a job carrying a huge knob around with him (Sorry Mooney, I had to get that in).

Lance - Was there ever any thought of doing the first LP with someone other than Bluurg?

Hammy - No, by the time of the album we were loving being with the Subhumans and Bluurg, it was perfect. So we just set our sights on writing and recording the album and because we were rehearsing and playing live so much we were getting fit and slick on our instruments. We could play faster and had a grasp of basic songwriting. Even if I do say so myself, we were really good.

Semi - We would have recorded it with the first label that asked. We were flattered by the fact Bluurg had asked and personally given the choice between them and EMI I would have gone for EMI.

Lance - Where did you record "Nobody Listens Anymore"?

Hammy - At Woodlands again with Neil Ferguson and Dick / Bruce Human producing. We had more time, we recorded nearly everything in one take and as far as we were concerned it was perfect. I still think it was a perfect representation of exactly how we were right then and the production was everything we had hoped it could be.

Semi - We recorded it at the Woodlands Studio in local Normanton. We liked the quality of the single so decided to record the album there. Dick and Bruce came up and did the engineering. They also sang on the backing vocals on "The Fix".

Lance - What did you think of the record at the time? What was the response to it like?

Hammy - We fucking loved it, we were so proud and it also went down amazingly well. I think the high point was when we got the front cover of Maximum Rock and Roll and a four page spread with a glowing endorsement by Pushead. I thought we'd carry on forever and tour the world but it would soon be over.

Semi - I thought it was brilliant the re-release by Blackfish records sounds much better than the original. The music is catchy and not over complicated unlike some of the material that came out afterwards. I always wanted to sing first and foremost and I think that comes through on the album.

Lance - What lead to the first split up?

Hammy - Well I was preparing for this life in a band and the singer had a serious relationship, he said he was going to rehearse less and not tour abroad or something. I panicked and drunkenly abused him instead of talking to him. I had crossed a bridge too far, said something too much and he quit. We were as close as brothers for a long time and the extra pressure and strain that being relatively successful put on us quickly exposed the cracks that were there but we'd been able to iron out before. Once Semi had gone we all quickly felt that the band was finished and whichever way we moved on it would be different.

Semi - Women, I didn't want to leave my girlfriend when we were planning a tour in Yugoslavia. I had a bust up with one of the other band members and that was it. I left there and then. Never to sing again!! Well only in the shower..

Lance - How many line-up changes had there been over the course of the band's history?

Hammy - Really two. The first line up of me, Semi, Mooney and then Tab was the real us. After Semi had gone, Tab and me quickly decided that we'd blown it and the new band wasn't going to be for us and left within 6 months. So then you get essentially the second line up of Mooney, Tez,

Trimble and Cuzzy.

Semi - I don't know to honest, I would imagine a fair few.

Lance - What did the others go on to do? Are you in touch with many ex-members?

Hammy - Mooney is a famous photographer who takes lots of shots for England's National Football team. Semi is a computer scientist in a hospital and Tab is a property surveyor. We mail each other at times, but we haven't really been together since we did an "Original line up" re-union show in Leeds in 87 I think. Which was actually the best show we ever did. We all seemed to feel like we had a point to prove and did so. I remember being stunned that we were so good that night, but knew that if we'd done another show we'd be back to flogging some old horse and we put it to bed.

Semi - I email Hammy now and again. He owns/runs Peaceville Records, a company which grew from selling our demo tapes. Mooney has his own business or so I hear. He does photography and is quite involved with the England Football Team. I haven't been in touch with Mooney for over 10 years. I have always stayed quite close to TAB and see him quite often. We both have kids and often go to each other's houses and listen to the Carpenters.

Lance - How long of a gap was there between you in the Instigators and Civilized Society?

Hammy - Only a couple of months.

Lance - Had you played in any other bands in between?

Hammy - No, but after Civ's I joined Sore Throat and did four albums drumming and singing with them.

Lance - How did you know the folks that would make up Civilized Society?

Hammy - Well I'd moved in with Dinger, the vocalist, and soon after I'd left the Instigators. A short while later they wanted me to join but they had a drummer, so they said I could always sing. So I did it. I'd nothing else to do and wanted to stay creative.

Lance - What made you want to switch to vocalist?

Hammy - Necessity, the band knew that I was a good organizer and in touch with a lot of people. They also watched the Instigators in awe really and wondered if by having me on board they would get places a bit faster.

Lance - Do you feel like that band was connected with the anarcho punk scene?

Hammy - In some ways some members were very extremely involved, up to the point of going to prison for four years. But other members were completely disinterested. As I was to find out, they were a very disjointed band who hadn't really had the same experience of closeness as I'd had with the Instigators.

Lance - What was the scene like at that point? What year was it that you started?

Hammy - I don't know when they started really as I came on board after the first two demos. Possibly around 85 when they started and I joined in 86 I think.

Lance - What made you choose that name for the band?

Hammy - I think Dinger got the name from a press piece talking about the state of the world.

Lance - How did the band differ from the Instigators?

Hammy - They didn't really like each other up to a point. It wasn't natural and it was strained.

Lance - Did you do any recording before the first album?

Hammy - They had done two demo's but there was something like 23 songs between the two, so there was enough for an album.

Lance - Why did you want to do the first record on Ironic Ears?

Hammy - Well, Bluurg weren't interested I don't think, they had carried on with the new Instigators and I think it was too close, either that or I didn't ask them. I knew Tim from Children of The Revolution records and he told me about Shane. Then we supported Amebix, Shane saw us and wanted to do an album.

Lance - What was it like working on that record? What were some of the high points of the record for you?

Hammy - Well, initially, we were all getting on, it was early days and we had fun making the first album. I'd sung for the first time and wasn't sure if it was good or not. But we did the record and were happy with it.



Lance - How did you like it? What was the response to it?

Hammy - We were pretty happy with the results, we went to Lion Studios in Leeds as it was cheaper than Woodlands and the sound wasn't as good but it was ok. We were more bothered about quantity than quality. The cover is OK, but it felt cheaper than the stuff I'd done with the Instigators so I wasn't overly proud with it. The response was OK, quite good actually, but I'd been spoilt before and it was a bit of a let down for me in the end.

Lance - Why did you call it "Scrap Metal"?

Hammy - Because Venom did 'Black Metal' and everyone was playing this metal or that metal. We thought we'd play "Scrap Metal"

Lance - Did you tour much to support it?

Hammy - Yes, we were never as busy as the 'Gators, but we did quite a lot of shows.

Lance - What bands were close to at the time?

Hammy - Amebix, Subhumans still, Axegrinder.

Lance - At what point did you start Peaceville?

Hammy - In 1981, the first-release "Flower 1" was the Instigators demo tapes, on my new label - Peaceville! I ran a cassette label all through the years I was in the bands up until 1987 when we released our first vinyl.

Lance - What were some of the initial goals of starting that label?

Hammy - To sell some Instigators demo's. Then I did a compilation of the bands I knew and was writing to and visiting, like FLUX, Chumbawamba and the Alternative. Both sold lots and lots of tapes and from day one I was a hell of a lot busier than I ever expected. It was a shock; I'd expected to sell maybe 100 in a year, not every week. I'd just stumbled on a career.

Lance - Do you still feel like those ideals are true?

Hammy - every one of my original crass punk ethics is just as strong now as it was then. I've just learned not to wear them on my sleeve so much.

Lance - What did the name mean?

Hammy - it means "place of peace" I'd hoped that we could be a peaceful harbor for bands, away from the music business sharks.

Lance - What changes did the band go through between the first album and "Violence Sucks"?

Hammy - basically as we were growing up the members became increasingly different in outlook and lifestyle - by the second album it was pretty much at the end of it's natural life.

Lance - What are your thoughts on the second record? High points? Low points?

Hammy - Strangely I have very few memories of that record. I think the in fighting had grown to such an extent that it overshadowed any memories that I'd care to keep.

Lance - Why did you pick that title for the album? Was it a parody of other peace punk records or just a simplification of your message?

Hammy - it was the opposite of a parody! Conflict had come onto the scene and gone against the Crass anti-violence stance. We felt that to introduce violence to the scene was just stupid and it would all die out quickly if they did. So we publicly said we didn't agree with any violence, to re-affirm the crass ideology. Strangely enough though, we received a letter from Conflict telling us that if we ever play London again, they would beat the living daylights out of us. Perversely it was signed "Steve Ignorant" - who had just joined Conflict. To think that a Crass member could threaten to attack us for agreeing with Crass's message was bizarre. We played London, in Conflict's home area, I was terrified - I can't speak for the rest - we had baseball bats and talked about what we'd do the whole way down. They didn't turn up, but a bunch of thugs did, we thought they'd been sent by Conflict - nothing happened but it was a scary night. Having all been attacked for no reason by the bouncers and some skinheads after an Instigators show I knew only too well how bad things can get, in a very fast manner.

Lance - Why did the band finally split up?

Hammy - one member went to jail, then it became obvious that three members were rehearsing on their own. So we went our separate ways.

Lance - Did anyone go on to start other bands?

Hammy - the three members never stopped playing. Apparently they do rock cover songs in bars. There was no love lost between us so I don't see them.

Lance - How do you reflect on the anarcho days? All naïve or in some ways effective?

Hammy - well it formed me and my ideas and I don't regret any of it, nor have I changed my views so it must have had some effect. It was quite naïve, but then again I was young and naïve so the two went hand in hand.

I wish there were a Crass now, I'd still buy their records and worship them like some quasi-religion.

Semi - I remember going to gigs and doing a quick sound check. We would then find an off-license and have a few quiet beers. We would then head back to gig stopping off for Tab to have a poo in the middle of the road (don't ask!). We would get back to the venue in good time to do our set. We always made sure that we were all tuned up before getting on stage. It's much more professional than standing there tuning up on stage. It was always a great feeling when you stood in the audience ready to go on stage. It's one of those things you never forget.

Lance - Do you still feel connected to any of those ideas?

Hammy - yeah, all of them. They're life's fundamental points which need to be heard in any generation. I dread to think what I might have been had there not been a Crass, Flux, Subhumans etc.

Semi - When you have kids your priorities change. I would like them to grow up in a safe and pleasant world with no war, no starvation, poverty or violence. However we still have all of these issues to deal with today and maybe that is why the ideals that we sang about still stand true. Maybe the time I spent singing in a band influenced some others to do the same and sing about the problems in the world, and maybe carry the torch forward for future generations.

Lance - How do you reflect on either of the band's histories?

Hammy - Instigators = great band, great time - but of it's time.

- Civilised Society? = confused!

- Sore Throat = wildly defiant, wickedly exciting and a great chance to learn where the boundaries are before later life (i.e. there are basically no boundaries other than the ones we create ourselves).

Semi - It was all over in a flash. I had almost five years in the band and they were good days. I think we did ourselves justice from a band who carried their kit around in a shopping trolley with a five watt practice amp and a bass guitar with one string. It took us months before we realized we needed to tune the guitars!! We didn't do half bad did we?

Lance - Anything else?

Hammy - Thanks for the interview. Good luck with the book and send me a signed copy when you've done :)

Semi - THERE IS NO GOD, THERE IS NO GOD!!!!



Nobody seems to remember Jesus Couldn't Drum. Was I the only person listening to them? Was it some in-joke that I didn't realize I was in on? After a few years of angry, sociopath, juvenile hardcore, it was nice to buy some happy, catchy pop music that wasn't somehow morally reprehensible.

Lance - How did you get interested in music? What made you want to start writing?

Jonathan Lemon - There was always music playing in the house when I grew up. I had piano lessons at school and picked up some tunes on a beat up acoustic guitar my dad had lying around. I'd mess around with the tuning because I was too lazy to learn the chords. My dad was kind of a bohemian beatnik arty painter type and encouraged me to

goof around with music and art and generally "express" myself. It wasn't long before I was messing around with two tape recorders making overdubs and slicing up reel-to-reel tapes. I also recorded songs and comic dialog and then draw covers for them. It was childish stuff and corny humor.... nothing political or particularly interesting. Once I met Peter we'd record a lot of "live" jamming sessions as well... just take some instruments and a tape recorder into a remote place (usually outdoors in the middle of a field or something) and make up songs on the spot. The big breakthrough was when the Roland SH101, TR-808 drum machine and the Fostex X-15 multitracker all came out around the same time and that really opened up the world of home recording. They were very affordable and a great leap forward in sound. Suddenly the recordings sounded half decent and we started taking it seriously. It seemed like a good was to fill in those awkward teenage brooding periods and helped fulfill fantasies about having relationships with unobtainable women.

I came of age in the mid 70s when music was all about bell-bottoms and guitar solos and I didn't like it at all. Everyone else was listening to bands like Rush and Emerson, Lake & Palmer and Mott The Hoople. Then suddenly it was 1976 and everyone we knew was in bands and all you needed was a haircut and a synthesizer balanced on an ironing board.

Lance - Who were your earliest inspirations?

Lemon - My dad actually had a pretty good record collection which I'd play

over and over as a kid on an old portable record player...he had a lot of old 78 RPM jazz records stuff like Dave Brubeck and Stan Kenton plus a lot of 60's French go-go pop stuff like Francoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan as well as African stuff like Osibisa and Ipi Tombi. He had a pretty eclectic taste. Also a lot of comedy records... Spike Milligan, Tony Hancock and Peter Sellers. That had a big influence on me. I used to check out Monty Python LPs from the public library. You had to take in your stylus for the librarian to inspect before you could take a record home! I can still quote those records verbatim.

One of our early reviews said we sounded like The Residents gone crazy in Luton on Eyeless in Gaza demos. That was both flattering and accurate. We both liked pretty much anything on the Cherry Red label and to a lesser extent Factory. Also Fad Gadget and Psychic TV were big influences on me. Peter had a totally different set of influences. He worked in a record shop and would bring home all sorts of interesting indie 7" singles like Blurt "Fish needs a Bike" which totally blew us away! Later on we both picked up on Neil Innes and the Bonzo Dog Band. A lot of people said we were like Syd Barrett/early Pink Floyd but I never really thought so. Because I am a pretty contrary person I've always tended to drift towards the most obscure stuff possible.

Lance - Had you been in any other groups before Jesus Couldn't Drum?

Lemon - There were different names and different people but always the same two main people, Peter (Pengwyn) and me. We were the wimpiest guys you could imagine. We didn't drink or smoke and were very socially awkward and very reactionary. We got beaten up a lot. Pretending to be in a band made us halfway cool in our eyes.

Lance - How did the group form? How did you know each other?

Lemon - We were at school together in Bushey, near Watford... the self-proclaimed armpit of Britain. We also lived on the same housing estate. There must have been something in the water because that dump of a town amazingly produced George Michael, Simon LeBon of Duran Duran and Kenny Baker who was the midget inside R2D2. We used to hang around with all the other misfits at school... The fat kids, the kids with acne, the kid with seriously bucked teeth and impaired vision, the kids with the weird birthmarks, etc. and then there was us. We both got tossed out of an army recruitment seminar, a fact I'm still quite proud of. We ended up working a supermarket operating this huge machine that made bails out of cardboard. The English school system at that time was officially mandated at 5% study and 95% hanging around in corridors. This left a lot of time for goofing around and getting sadistically beaten around the face and neck. Casio had just come out with the VL-Tone, which was a musical calculator. It looked really cool and it had some drum patterns and a basic sequencer. We both had one of those and started fiddling around with tape recorders overdubbing with a cheap electric guitar. That was our first attempts at recording. I still have them.

Lance - What does the name mean?

Lemon - It's from a book by Gunter Grass called 'The Tin Drum'. Page 345 in my Vintage edition. It was just the name we had when we got the record deal. Two weeks later we would have been called something else.

Lance - The group seemed to be part of the post-punk, new wave fallout.

Did you feel any relationship to that music or punk or anything?

Lemon - Before we go any further I want to say that I don't consider us to be a well-known band at all. We didn't sell many records and didn't make much of a stir in the music press. I'm still amazed people outside of Watford have even heard of us and now, twenty years later that people still remember.

Punk was over by the time we came on the scene and for me was violent and reactionary. That's exactly what the music scene needed at the time but I was way too sensitive to be part of it. I went to a Killing Joke gig when I was quite young and it really scared me. The New Wave eighties were all about dressing up and basically looking stupid but there was also thriving Indie scene lead by New Order, The Smiths and Echo & the Bunnymen. The bible of hipness back then was a British weekly newspaper called the New Musical Express and to a lesser extent Melody Maker and Sounds. MRR was very influential as well. It was a lot harder to get your music heard by anyone if the NME didn't give you a rave review. Today with the Internet and MySpace. Every band dreamed of the elusive "record deal" because other than that the only option was paying for studio time and releasing a demo cassette tape.

Lance - What were live gigs like? Did you play live much?

Lemon - We started off playing lots of gigs in the back room of pubs to crowds of six or seven people. We had colored light bulbs and a black light and used a backing tape for the drums. We only had one synthesizer back then, a Wasp, which was monophonic and however you twiddled the knobs it sounded like an amplified bee trapped in a matchbox. We had our own echo box and a Strat copy guitar which we played through a flanger pedal and a drum machine which could only hold four patterns. It was horrible. Once the records came out we did quite a few tours in Belgium and Holland and later on in Italy. We'd never been outside of England before so to have someone pay for us to get on the ferry and play for delighted edgy and hip European youth was an amazing experience. There were four of us by then and it was a lot of fun although we never made any money.

Lance - How would you describe Jesus Couldn't Drum to someone hip to hip music but having never heard you?

Lemon - How about a dated whimsical eclectic pop duo with comical lyrics that didn't sell any records?

Lance - What bands were you close to? Who did you play with a lot?

Lemon - We had a manager for about five minutes who was also manager of The Chesterfields. I was friends with Alan Jenkins of the Deep Freeze Mice who I still think are one of the great under-appreciated bands of all time. I was also pals with Captain Sensible especially during the time he was recording "Revolution". I was living in Brighton in the mid-80s and that was quite a scene with Creation records and Primal Scream but I wasn't any part of it. We didn't hang out with other bands much. We were pretty anti-social. Live we did a tour with The Dentists. Once in Belgium we had a support band (Won Ton Ton) that was fronted by a Bea Van Der Maet who went on to be a huge Europop star!

Lance - I think the first record was "Even Roses Have Thorns". Could you talk about this record? How did it come about? Who was Lost Moments Records?

Lemon - That was the first 7" single. We'd had a few tracks on compilations albums before then. It was quite a stroke of luck. Peter was working in a record shop in Watford and gave our demo tape to a customer who claimed to be starting a record label. The next thing we knew we were in a studio recording a song.

The single got played on the John Peel show a couple of times. We thought that would be that but then the owner of the studio called up and asked us back to record some more. Lost Moment released everything we did at that point and gave us total creative control. Of course they never gave us any money either! They released a lot of Rockabilly stuff.

Lance - What was it like recording with

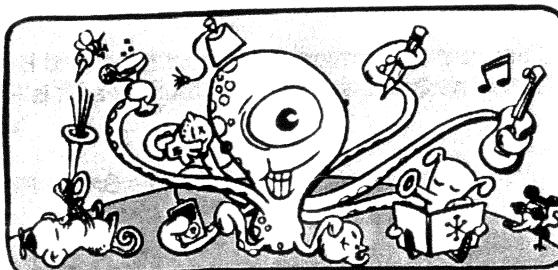
"Jesus Couldn't Drum"?

Lemon - There were some pretty creative sessions that I remember. Nearly all of it was done at Pyramid Studios in Luton on a mixing desk that had been custom built for Jimmy Page. It was circular! But apart from that, because we were naive and goggled-eyed at all the toys and gadgets that were available to play with, we were really going nuts with experimentation. On "Steve, don't leave" there is a solo played on a "guitar" made out of rubber bands stretched across a toilet seat. We were recording the sound of dropping bricks in a river and singing outside at 2AM at one point. For some reason we ended up with one of the very first Emulator keyboards that had belonged to Tears For Fears and that featured heavily on the recordings. Brian Pugsley engineered and produced nearly all of the albums and played a big part in forming the JCD "sound" and stopped us from doing hundreds of things we would probably have regretted. He later went on to work with Bronski Beat, The Sugarcubes and a lot of the One Little Indian bands like The Shamen.

Lance - That was followed by, my favorite, "Er Something About Cows". What was it like recording that record? What did the title mean?

Lemon - That was a great recording session. It took about a week and we were pretty excited about being in a studio and having people pay us attention. There was no real idea or plan. We just started recording some songs and they all just came out the way they did. The novelty songs and humor came out of that atmosphere.

The two second song "This is Fun" was just a joke that we recorded in about an hour but it got the most attention of all the songs on that album and ended up in the Guinness Book of Records and we had to do about fifty interviews about just that song for radio stations. Dr. Demento called us as well and we had no idea who he was! He kept asking for more stuff. Had we known we would have probably recorded an album just for



him.

For the title, all we had was an idea that we would put a photograph I took of some cows in Whitby on the cover. We called up John Peel at the BBC to ask what we should call the record but they wouldn't put us through so we got John Walters who was his assistant at the time. He said "Er... Something About Cows???? Hmmm? Well how about that". I was an annoyingly militant vegetarian at the time and was obsessed with the idea that these cows would be eaten by people who wouldn't even think of them as living breathing beautiful animals. This was before "Meat is Murder" by The Smiths was released. That would have been a better title of course.

Lance - Why did it come with a flexi?

Lemon - Thinking no one would buy out LP without an exciting "extra" we had that idea but it got out of control and the next thing we knew the record label were making 500,000 copies of that flexi and giving them away with magazines like Music Week and Zig Zag. It really got a lot of people in Britain to know who were. Flexi disks were still a bit of a novelty back then.

Lance - Next I think was "Autumn Leaves". What was that song about? Why did you want it to be the single?

Lemon - That sounds like a loaded question! I think the original idea was to release a single with four A-sides. However, the record company thought that "Autumn Leaves" was "commercial" and wanted to push that more. The other three songs were really kind of far out. One is a 20 minute long ambient piece and the other two pop songs are very short around 90 seconds. Autumn Leaves was actually quite different in the demo form but some "producer" with horrific oversized glasses came in and recorded a lot of cheesy guitar overdubs while we weren't even there. We hated that mix but somehow they talked us in to keeping it. Poor Peter.... They totally ruined his song.

Lance - How did Lester Square get involved with the group?

Lemon - Peter was a huge fan of The Monochrome Set and a lot of his songs were produced in that retro sixties style. I think at some point he sent a copy of the record to Tom (a.k.a. Lester) and the next thing I know he's in the recording studio with us! This was when the Monochrome Set had split up and hadn't got back together again. He was very nice and a brilliant guitarist.

Lance - The next LP was "Good Morning Mr. Square". What were some of the highlights of that record?

Lemon - That record was actually nearly all out-takes from the first LP plus a bunch of home recordings mixed in. I was in art school then and they had a recording studio with some horrifically outdated synthesizers which of course I utilized as much as possible. Peter recorded most of that record himself with Tom on production.

Lance - That LP came with a comic strip. Had you been doing much comic art at that point?

Lemon - I'd forgotten all about that. Actually I think the original pressings came with a whole comic book. I was drawing cartoons and doing animation for a living back then and still am.

Lance - What was your priority: music or comics?

Lemon - If I could go back and do it all over again I'd take the music career over the cartoon one. But let's be realistic.... many people would agree with me that I'm not really a musician.

Lance - "I'm A Train" was the last EP. What made you pick that song for the title track?

Lemon - Again, the record company talked us into that. It was a dancy-type of early techo beat which was the flavor of the moment. It actually charted in Italy and we got to tour over there.

Lance - "Rutting Orange Peel and Blind Lemon Pie" was the last record. What was it like recording that one? Did you know you were splitting up?

Lemon - That was another album of odds and ends although all the singles and the flexi were on it as well. The title is from a Eric Idle of Monty Python project called "The Rutles" and brilliant spoof on the Beatles. It wasn't our "Let it Be" though.

Lance - What does the title mean?

Lemon - Rutling Orange Peel and Blind Lemon Pie were two Mississippi Delta blues singers. You can get it on DVD now. Check it out!

Lance - I think there was a live record too. How did that come about? Who put that out?

Lemon - Thankfully that wasn't a commercially available record. It was a live set from the Italy tour. Hopefully they burned all known copies. It was only available via mail-order from some guy who never asked permission to release it.

Lance - What is your favorite of all the Jesus Couldn't Drum songs?

Lemon - The Seagull Song probably. I've even played that live on a ukulele and it sounds okay. I always liked the way it went into a pointless freeform

jazz ending just to make it longer.

Lance - What is your favorite recording?

Lemon - The JCD Theme tune was quick and painless. Most of those studio recordings were grueling stretched out affairs and at the end you were so sick of the song you never wanted to hear it again.

Lance - Why did the band split?

Lemon - We never really split up. What happened was that I was living in Brighton (south coast) at art school and Peter was in Coventry so it was geographically very difficult to even get together. I think we'd sort of had enough with the record company by then. They started licensing our songs to other companies and we would be browsing in CD stores and suddenly find a "Best of JCD" compilation that we'd never heard of with these horrible gothic covers that were really inappropriate. One of the agreements we had with the record company was that we always designed the covers. The last gig we did was at the Rock Garden in London and we played our own songs in separate sets because we hadn't been able to rehearse. We're still good friends and keep in touch.

Lance - Did any of you play music after the split?

Lemon - Peter went on to record two albums as "The Cat & Mouse Band" featuring every member of the Monochrome Set except Bid which was really pretty impressive. He also did a pretty good solo album as "The Epicurean Guide" Then he was in The Creams for a while. He recorded hundreds of brilliant songs that were never released commercially. They'll probably be discovered one day and released as a box set to high critical acclaim. As for me, I was in a toy instrument surf band called the "Little Green Hondas" at art school and then toured with "The Chrysanthemums" who released a few CDs. After then it was a long list of short solo projects including "Spacecake" who did covers of TV themes and some dubious dabbling in computer game soundtracks. Currently I'm fronting a surf instrumental band called "Monkey Verses Robot"

Lance - How did you get interested in Cuba?

Lemon - When any non-US citizen arrives in the US they give you an immigration form which includes the questions "Did you come here with the intent to overthrow the government of the USA?" and "Have you ever, in or outside the United States: knowingly committed any crime of moral turpitude or a drug-related offense for which you have not been arrested?". I think the very first question is: "Have you ever been a member of, or in any way affiliated with, the Communist Party or any other totalitarian party? It goes on to ask if you have ever sympathized with the communist cause. I'm not kidding. It's also implied that it's okay to be a Nazi fascist murderer as long as it wasn't between the years 1939-1945. That was kind of shocking to me. So of course I wanted to know what the US government didn't want me to see in Cuba and because I had a British passport it was easy to go.

Lance - What were some of the highpoints of your stay there?

Lemon - Cuba is a totally fascinating country. I've seen it change quite a bit over the past 15 years. Of course there are a lot of problems as well but also so many great things. It's a mix between Bizarro World and going back in time to 1959... a complete mind fuck. If you want to see what happens when people can't fulfill their materialist ambitions and get to live in a society which—for better or worse—is actually fairly equal. On the other hand there is a serious tourism apartheid, which a lot of people take advantage of. Whatever happens after Castro won't alter the fact that the Cuban people are full of life and everyone is highly educated and extremely passionate. From what I've seen, compared to a lot of Latin American countries Cuba is actually a pretty decent place to live. Also, Cuban socialism is very different from Russian "socialism". We tend to lump all those so-called "failed ideologies" into the same dustbin but actually there's a lot we could learn from them.

Lance - What was it like traveling around Central America?

Lemon - I living was in Honduras for two years volunteering in the Peace Corps and then working at the United Nations. I got to visit a lot of countries in Central and South America. I'd love to go back to Guatemala. Belize was charming. Peru was amazing. Buenos Aires is the new Prague. Costa Rica is the least interesting country in the entire region but they have a good PR machine.

Lance - What do you think of Ortega's return to power?

Lemon - It will be interesting to see what happens because he cut a lot of deals with the PLC and business leaders to get back in power so he's not the man he used to be but the Sandinistas have effectively been running the country on a local level since the revolution anyway. It's only the US obsession with the idea of "absolute presidential power" that's kept him out until now. Nicaragua was totally wrecked by the 1972 Earthquake and the Reagan-backed Contra war but what it has going for it (and El Salvador as well to a certain extent) is that the people who what they lost and benefited from the social reforms of their revolutions so I think the future looks brighter.

Honduras never had a revolution and when you cross the Nicaraguan border from Honduras it's amazing how instantaneously different those two countries are.

Lance - Can you really stay a vegetarian in those parts of the world?

Lemon - Oh yes. Pretty much everyone eats rice and beans. Dead animal flesh is reserved for the middle classes and special occasions. Also, wherever you go in the world you can find pizza, Chinese food.

Lance - What do you think you'll do next?

Lemon - I'm working on a Monkey Versus Robot album called "Ping Island Voodoo" which is surf instrumental versions of TV themes and other covers. I think it's a lot of fun. When that's done I'll probably watch the Colbert Report.

Lance - Anything else?

Lemon - This is where I plug my website www.lemonworld.com

This is an interview I did with Dave and Nick, guitar and bass for the Sears, for my book. Underrated melodic anarcho punk, their 12", "If Only" is one of the unsung heroic gestures of the time.

Lance - How did you get into punk rock?

Dave - I got into punk rock at school really, y'know all your mates were into it I was always into guitar bands pretty early on like T. Rex but always thought they looked a bit silly in their frilly gear to be honest.

Nick - I got into punk after I saw The Pistols on T.V. being ultra obnoxious on the Bill Grundy show. Also seeing all the stuff that was happening with all the other bands being formed, and the whole "newness" of punk. I really liked the idea of the old music scene being given a good kick up the arse. I was only 13 at the time, so it felt really new and vibrant.

Lance - What made you want to start a band?

Dave - I had a friend called Alleric who was in a band and he used to leave all his guitars at my house 'cos his house was miles from their rehearsal rooms so I used to practice at home with his gear then I had a few friends who were like minded and it all kinda stemmed from there.

Nick - I wanted to get into a band after going to see other bands and loving every minute of it. The noise, bustle, and loads of different people coming to gigs from all over the country had a big effect on me, and I really wanted to be a part of it with my own band.

Lance - How did you all meet and when was that?

Dave - We all knew each other from school nick was the one who basically got us all together though I guess that was around late 78...but the band got together bout late 79 early 80 if I remember right.... its been a while.

Nick - All the members of the band knew each other from school, and all lived locally as the year that we started was the year after we had all left school. The singer was from a place about 15 miles away, and I had met her at a gig. The time The Sears started was January 1981.

Lance - How did you find out about Crass and anarcho punk?

Dave - We were all into that stuff anyway. But me I was more into Discharge. I liked the guitar tone. Ha Ha Once again that was more Nick and Corny (our singer) who were more into that stuff than me.

Nick - The first time that I heard about Crass was when their first album was reviewed in a paper called Sounds. I remember the reviewer really slagging them off for their lyrics and sound, but there was something about the picture that was used in the review that got me thinking. Their first album really had an influence on me, and I remember "dossing" the streets with my mates, singing the lyrics.

Lance - What were the early gigs like? Who were you playing with?

Dave - We did a lot of local gigs with local bands. Nothing too spectacular really we even used to play in Nick's house at parties when his parents were out!! bless 'em I cant remember the first "proper" gig to be honest although I do remember doing gigs with Conflict and Discharge at the Cedar Club in Birmingham along with GBH and the Dead Wretched, Drongos for Europe and Birmingham bands like that.

Nick - The first gig that we ever played was at a local youth club, with the smallest amount of equipment ever seen, after being dropped off by my dad in a really small car that he had at the time. None of the band could drive at the time, as we were too young. No one played with us, but quite a few people turned up by "word of mouth". It was a mad experience for the people running the youth club, and as you could expect, we weren't asked back. The gig only made us want to play more. The next gig was at a pub in Birmingham, playing with a local band, called C.I.D. All I can remember about the gig was being ripped off by a second singer that we had recruited, and the C.I.D. singer screaming "we're fucking greeeeeaaaaat!!!!", when

they were far from great! Still, the gig made us want more!

Lance - How involved were you with the anarcho scene at the time?

Dave - Me personally not that much like i said before nick and corny were more involved with that than me, i agreed with it all but they seemed to have more of a voice than me if you get what i mean

Nick - I wasn't that involved with much "direct action" to try to change things, but I did go on a couple of "Stop The City" marches, in London and Leeds. We did play gigs as benefits for animal rights, the miners strike, and anarchy centers. Every other gig was a benefit for someone or another, and looking back, it was only our hard work and believing in what we were doing that kept us going. I don't want to sound like an arse, but now that I am older, the money from gigs never seemed to go to the groups. We did it for the love, but were the last to take anything out. Wouldn't change a thing though.

Lance - How did you wind up on Bluurg?

Dave - I think we did a few shows with the Subhumans and nick once again had more to do with that than anyone else. If I remember right we were gonna release a single on Mortarhate first but that fell through then the Bluurg thing happened.

Nick - We ended up on Bluurg after playing with The Subhumans a few times. We got to know Dick, and he asked us to do an album.

Lance - Had you done any recordings before?

Dave - A couple of demos. That's all.

Nick - We had recorded about 4 demos. I have them on tape somewhere. This was the first time that we had done anything to release.

Lance - What was it like recording that record?

Dave - well I was about 18 at the time so it was all new to me I didn't know what the hell was going on hahahaha I remember having a fun time though for most part except when someone (no names) erased half of the tapes and we had to do a couple of songs again he he he I remember we did it in a week recording and mixing looking back now and the job I do now I'm kinda like ouch that's outta tune ouch that's outta time ha ha, but you know it was a great experience I wouldn't have changed a thing.

Nick - Totally amazing doing the record. We stopped in London for a week, and saw how, as we saw it " the proper bands did it"!! We recorded it at Southern Studios, with Jon Loder, who was connected to Crass, putting up the finances. Crass popped into the studio a couple of times and it was great to experience the whole thing.

Lance - Were you happy with it? How was the public response?

Dave - Well like I said I was happy with it then kind of but it all seemed to happen in a flash. We were very young y'know. I think we did a couple of pressings maybe more of 2000 each and they sold I believe. People who had it liked it I guess, I've seen a couple of them on Ebay over the past few years though ha ha ha! I've had a couple of bands I've worked for tell me they used to come see us play.... that's kinda weird.

Nick - I remember listening to the album in the recording studio at the end of a hard week and thinking that it was a load of trash!! Couldn't believe that it had turned out so crap. It was too rushed, and needed two weeks, not one week to do it properly. Everything from the sound to the artwork was rushed and we were really disappointed To this day I can't really play the album, due to the mistakes.

Dave the guitarist has tried to re-record the album, but it was never finished, due to his commitments.

The public response was ok as we sold about 2,500 copies. Not in the big league, but good enough for us.

Lance - What was it like to be a political band with a female front person at the time?

Nick - The only gig that we had any hassle with having a girl singer was when we played at Sunderland and there were a load of skinheads there shouting "get your tits out". It never got any worse though. Most people were totally cool with us and treated us as friends.

Lance - Did you feel compelled to deal with feminist issues?

Nick - We were compelled to deal with feminist issues as the singer wrote 90% of the lyrics. Totally agreed with the views though, as I did with the lyrics for other issues within the songs. Wouldn't have wanted to be involved with a song if I didn't agree with what it was trying to get across.

Lance - Did you tour much?

Dave - Not as much as I would have liked too but we did a few tours. One that stands out was with a Norwegian band called Bannlyst. They were great and their drummer was a nutter. He loved to drink Scrumpy cider and run across the roofs of cars...very amusing we thought.

Nick - We only really toured once, with a Norwegian group called Bannlyst. Most of the gigs consisted of one to three off at a time.



We managed to do around 100 gigs in the four years that we were together. Always seemed to be teaching a new drummer how to play the songs, and not getting a consistent tour going.

Lance - Were there any other recordings?

Dave - there were other recordings just demos before the album was recorded I don't have them but I think nick may have he has tons of stuff from back then it's quite an eye-opener to see all the stuff he's got, I'm really happy he kept all that. I have a few live recordings from Wolverhampton and Leeds.

Nick - As I have said before, no proper recordings, only a few demos that I have on tape. You are welcome to a copy if you want one.

Lance - Why did the band finally split up?

Dave - Hmmm That's a hard one. I'm not too sure to be honest. All I know is that the singer wanted a job! I guess she was over earning no money... I think in all the years we did the band we earned about thirty quid total ha ha ha ha so she left and that was that.

Nick - The band decided to split as the singer had had enough, and we couldn't really replace her. We were totally pissed off with teaching new drummers as to have to get a new singer. I was well fed up, and it took me a long time to get over the band splitting. The bands that I was in later in life never meant the same to me. I would have walked to the gigs that The Sears played, as it was a way of life to me.

Lance - What did the others go on to do?

Dave - Nick the bass player owns a company. Corny works for a local government music scheme for underprivileged kids I think. But I ain't that sure, Ian Bates the drummer he died from a form of leukemia..... he was 21... quite sad when now at 40 you look back on it, and I'm a sound engineer for touring rock/metal bands. Whatever.

Nick - I have been in two bands since The Sears. The first was a Rhythm and Blues band that got me playing again, but it wasn't really in my blood. The second, believe it or not was a Sex Pistols tribute band!!!! Don't fall about laughing. I did it just to get me playing again, but as you can imagine, it was slightly embarrassing. Nice to play again though.

Dave, the guitarist has done a load of sound engineering and has traveled the world. He is currently doing the Slipknot tour, which will last for 18 months.

Haven't seen or heard of what the singer has done over the last 20 years, and we had that many drummers, I don't see us as having one if you know what I mean. Batesy, who played on the album died of leukemia not long after recording the album.

Lance - How do you reflect on the anarcho days? All naïve or in some ways effective?

Dave - Hmm I guess effective in some ways but I always used to think it was all about an attitude to your own life anyway... There ain't no point trying to change anyone or anything if you ain't changed your own way of thinking. I think it's a personal thing like our slogan used to say you can't change the system until you change yourself.... I still believe in that.

Nick - The anarcho days were, don't want sound like an old fart, but they were the best days of my musical life. Of course looking back, we were young and trying to change the world, but I still hold a lot of the ideals that I had then today.

Lance - Do you still feel connected to any of those ideas?

Dave - Only as I mentioned above.

Nick - As I have said, I still believe in a lot of the ideas from that time, but it has had to fit in with my life today. I have a wife, four grown up kids, a mortgage, car loans, and my own business. I suppose that I have got a lot of things that the anarcho ideal life would not agree with, but my kids have grown up as great human beings who care about other people and other things, and I treat every person with respect that I meet. However, if that respect is not reciprocated then the respect is lost. This applies to people / or organizations in power or the average person I meet. So since The Sears have broken up I have still challenged various issues I have seen as being wrong. This has led to taking part in organized marches and campaigns as well as challenging teachers / and corporate organisations. My children have always been aware of my beliefs and I have openly discussed issues with them I feel this has made them more rounded young people. We are told by their school that they discuss their views in lessons and are aware of what is happening in the world.

Lance - How do you reflect on the band?

Dave - Great fun, great friends. I recently purchased a pro tools system for my house and me and Nick had great fun re recording all the old songs so I could test all the equipment. It was great looking back on it and thinking how funny it all was.

Nick - Already answered, I think.

Lance - Anything else?

Dave - Not really. If I had to do it again I would and not change a thing!!!

Nick - Just that I am really sorry for taking so long. When I saw the questions, I knew that it would take a time to answer, as I don't like doing things by half.

I hope that it is not too late to get in the book, good luck with it, and get in touch if you need any more info.



Mike Thorn forced me to buy the first This Is My Fist record when it came out. I really had no idea what it was but Mike thought I would dig it and he was very right. I've pretty much dug everything since and was so happy when we got to play with them on our last trip out West.

Lance - What was the first punk show you ever went to?

Annie - Hmmm... it was at a club called the Number One Soul, in Elgin, IL in either late '88 or early '89. I think the lineup was Contracide, Life Sentence & the Kentucky Fried Abortions. It was one of those life-defining, sitcom ending moments.

Craigums - There were some backyard/garage/living room/high school quads shows I had seen but my first real 'punk' show was at Gilman St in 1987 or 88. Stikky, Neurosis, Slambodians, Plaid Retina and the Skin Flutes. Seminal.

Lance - What made you want to play music? What did you listen to before you got into punk?

Annie - The first three cassette tapes I bought on my own were Appetite for Destruction, the Cure's Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me and the next trip to Musicland, in the mall, netted Weird Al's Polka Party. I got very into the Cure, Depeche Mode, Nitzer Ebb, Ministry, Skinny Puppy, that kind of stuff. My dad had an electric guitar and a small Crate amp that I started to play around with. I had been watching him play Buddy Holly songs since I was a kid and I guess I just figured I should play too. The Cure was the easiest kind of thing to play along to and I learned the non-electronic songs on Standing on a Beach. Incidentally, the first song I ever learned with a band was Six Pack by Black Flag.

Craigums - First it was Billy Joel, then it was RATT and Weird Al, then it was the Repo Man soundtrack and it was all over from there...

Lance - How did the band start? Had you been in any previous groups?

Annie - I had been in a few bands. My first band was called Vomiting Babies on Fire. I joined because they had a show in 30 minutes and their singer couldn't sing and play bass at the same time. I was watching their practice and they turned to me and said "can YOU play bass?" I learned about 6 songs in 30 minutes and then played a show in the drummers garage. I think we played 2 shows in all. The first truly active band was The Mushuganas, which was weird because at the time, they were my favorite band. To suddenly find myself in the band was both cool and with consequence. The next band was Ambition Mission which was almost always a lot of fun and the first band where I wrote songs and sang in. it also forced me to get over an almost crippling shyness.

Lance - What made you choose the name This Is My Fist?

Annie - It's a lyric from a Comsomol Diaries song, who are friends from Chicago. It was the only name we could all agree on. And there were a LOT of potentials. Our first two shows, which happened to be with Craigums other band, Green Angel, we were billed as Salvation Army.

Lance - What were your first shows like? Who were some of the big bands in the Bay when you were starting?

Annie - We had remarkable good luck, as we never really had to "pay dues", so to speak. We were getting offered shows fairly frequently, mostly at Mission Records in SF. Some bands we played with were Shotwell, Scholastic Deth.... actually a lot of it is a blur.

Lance - What do you think is the best thing about living in the Bay?

Annie - The relatively immediate access to areas without people in them. Trees, hills, waterfalls.

Craigums - On a national level it has many benefits. After going through the South I appreciate our liberal attitudes, after being on the east coast I appreciate our pace of life, after going through the Midwest I appreciate our

food selections (healthy vegetarian especially), and after zipping through the heartland I can come home and appreciate our godlessness.

Annie - Yea, I kinda got sick of the god shit as soon as we got into the south.

Lance - Do you think it's easier or harder to play music there as opposed to other big cities?

Annie - I don't know. When I lived in Chicago, we had surrounded ourselves with a really creative and incredible scene of kids. However, we lived at the venue so it was easy access (E-Z, why you wear your pants like that?!?) baby. It seems like in the Bay Area there's just so much going on all the time, with so many people involved, that everyone gets absorbed by their own genre. Not much crossover. I am always amazed by the small towns we play in and how tight knit and supportive everyone is. Getting shows seems to be a lot easier the farther away we get from the Bay Area.

Craigums - I imagine it is like anywhere else where you have droughts and explosions of scene activity. The dot.com era was a particularly bad one though because it so drastically raised the cost of living so quickly tons of people moved (like you, right Lance?), venues shut down, practice spaced had to close up, artists couldn't afford to stay in SF...it was a dark period but it created a whole new scene of disenfranchised folks which, as we all know, is the very heart and soul of a good underground culture.

Lance - Could you talk about your first 7" How do you reflect on it now?

Annie - I feel like it was a great time, because we didn't have any expectations for ourselves. We were just playing to make music, and ourselves happy.

Lance - What is with the tank on the cover?

Annie - Todd (previous bass player) did the cover for that. We both wanted to do art for the 7", so he did the outer cover and I did the inside.

Lance - Who was Left Off The Dial Records?

Annie - You mean who IS. Its run by a nice fella named Dan. He lives in Oakland. He's a little taller than me, with brown hair, has very piercing eyes, and it's rare he doesn't wear a black shirt. I saw him in a tie once. He's put out a few releases, when he has the money, the latest being the L'il Runt 7". There's a website at www.leftoffthodial.net. Without him, we probably wouldn't have gotten our shit together enough to put out our own 7".

Lance - What was the "Letters From A Landfill" comp all about? Why the long gap between releases?

Annie - If I remember right, the Peels took an extremely long time to get the artwork to Dan at LOTD, and there was NO DELAY on our part. But I often remember wrong, so that might not be it. It could just have easily been our fault.

Lance - What happened with that first line-up? Why did you split and how did this new group come together?

Annie - I guess we just stopped getting along the way we used to. We definitely had different ideas on how to continue with the band. After slumping through the last two years, I was feeling really bitter about this band and really wanted to be done with it. Then these fine fellas came along and made me realize what I originally loved about this band.

Lance - How did you wind up on No Idea?

Annie - I believe we owe our gratitude to the guys in North Lincoln. They told us that our 7" was played a lot at the house and we were like, "whoa, really? awesome!" and they were like, "man, you should totally be on that!" and I was all like, "pffft! as if! they'd never have us!", and then they were like "wtf is your problem? You should do it!" The next thing I knew, we were talking to Var and ROTFOL-ing.

Lance - What does "A History of Rats" mean?

Annie - It's a reference to the long-standing frat house that is our 'elected' administration.

Lance - Who did the cover art?

Annie - Well, Todd gave me a basic image that had the monkey and Reagan assassination on it, our friend Brandon made a silkscreen out of it, then I took that and added some more things to it, a band logo, and painted it with water colors. I did the back cover of the birds attacking the surfer couple. Then Var had to spend like 400 hours fixing it so it would print out the way it was intended to look.

Lance - What was it like recording that record?

Annie - To be frank, it wasn't that much fun.

Lance - What's the worst thing that happened on your last tour?

Craigums - Lawrence, Kansas on Fourth of July with Leftover Crack. And the mosquitoes in New York. All in all not a very bad tour!

Annie - Not only the mosquitoes, but the ants that were all over you when you ducked into your sleeping bag to escape the mosquitoes.

Lance - What's the funniest thing that's happened to the band?

Annie - Jack and Craig being detained at the Niagara Falls Canadian border because they had mustaches. When they got into the detention room,

everyone else had mustaches too. Seth and I walked right through. Also, any time we spend with Hit Me Back is bound to end in funniness.

Lance - Do you really support the Cubs? In a Giants town?

Annie - Hey man, though my heart will always be in Chicago, don't forget I live in Oakland. It's all A's. I will be living back in Chicago for opening day on April 9th, with a beer in one mitten-shrouded hand and nachos in the other.

Lance - Anything else?

Craigums - Thanks Lance!

Annie - Yea! Thanks!



YANK FICTION

you're an american and somehow
i guess that's supposed to mean
you can kick a lot of ass
and cut down a lot of trees
you're piece of mind
is compromised only by the fact
that you're too blind
to see what's going on
no one can hear you scream
a life with blinders on
is hardly life to me
can't you see you're needed
stop feeling so defeated
oh say can you see
what the flag means to me
by the dawn's early light
i feel nothing but contempt
blood colors run together
over red white & blue
oh say can you see....
wake your battered ego
lift your head up off the bar
dust off your dull-edged morals
and take account of who you are
my peace of mind
was shattered to a thousand pieces
when i realized the truth
about what's going on
no one can hear you scream...

MUSIC REVIEWS

ADAM AND THE ANTS – “Dirk Wears White Sox” LP

ADAM AND THE ANTS – “Kings Of The Wild Frontier” LP

ADAM AND THE ANTS – “Prince Charming” LP

My view of the Ants is that of an American fan that missed out on the early glory days. Obviously, as a teen in Hawaii, I wasn't at any of those classic early tours even though now I love those early recordings like “Ligotage”, “Plastic Surgery” and “Hampstead”. I didn't even hear the first album until import copies started showing up after the “Kings of the Wild Frontier” LP. It's funny, at the time I remember thinking it was such a wild and angular record, like the first Siouxsie or something. But now it sounds so different. “Car Trouble” sounds like the Clean with its pretty and jangling guitars. “Kick!” is also great melodic punk that, if release 15 years later, would've been called BritPop. “Animals And Men” could have been Zounds. It's very arty farty. But compared to what passes for art music these days it sounds nearly inspired.

I guess most people know the story of how the Ants were managed by Malcolm McLaren. After dressing the band as pirates, McLaren fired Adam, found a teenaged Burmese girl to sing, and created the musically superior Bow Wow Wow. Adam got ex-Banshees, ex-Models Marco Pirroni and formed the Ants most people know. This is where “Kings Of the Wild Frontier” falls, a sort of rip-off of what Bow Wow Wow were doing, it's still a record that I liked. I pretty quickly new it wasn't cool especially with there being so many issues between Crass and Ants fans. It was like war back then, so I couldn't admit to owning this record. But now that it's all ancient history, like the Cocksparrer LPs I like against my better judgment, I find this a well-produced and dynamic record unlike anyone else, except Bow Wow Wow... “Press Darlings” is great as is “Feed Me To The Lions”. Even “Ants Invasion” sorta sounds like that last Thatch record now. “Dog Eat Dog” is a good, interesting song.

“Prince Charming” is mostly awful. I could barely tolerate the way they looked on “Kings” as it seemed so silly. But they look like idiots on “Prince Charming” and the title tracks awful video just made me hate them more. And the music was really dire with awful, awful stuff like “Ant Rap”. But there were two moments so great that it's worth picking this out of your local bargain bin. First of all, “Stand And Deliver” is great. Now, I first heard this track as it came as a giveaway single with “Kings”. The single was backed by “Beat My Guest” which I think is crazy as it's the Ants best song! The other great moment of this record is a really weird song that's secretly totally catchy titled “Picasso Visita El Planeta De Los Simios”. Imagine if one of the better songs from the first album was covered by, I dunno, Haircut 100. It's actually quite good.

(Do It, Sony)

ADOLESCENTS, THE “Welcome To Reality” 7"

ADOLESCENTS, THE “Brats In Battalions” LP

A while back I had written about the first Adolescents record. I don't think I did a good job conveying how important that record was. I mean, I loved the Adolescents and looking back, Rikk Agnew's guitar sound had a profound impact on my playing. Seriously, I can't imagine that Pitchfork or Rocket From The Crypt never listened to this record without feeling something. It's snotty punk with near perfect guitar playing.

I love “Welcome To Reality”, the follow-up 7” that also came out in 1981. While not it may not have the hits like “No Way” or “Kids of the Black Hole”, there are still three solid punk songs with that classic SoCal sound also captured by early Social Distortion and DI. “Losing Battle” is the ripper, but I actually really prefer the moody title track, reminiscent of “Democracy” or even “Richard Hung Himself”.

Six years later, the Adolescents reformed and put together “Brats” all on their own. Maybe a little too polished for their own good, it doesn't have the impact of the first record. I think a big part of it must be that Tony was older and didn't have that young snotty sound to his voice. Plus, the band has gone way political writing about Reagan and Libya and nothing about “the queers”. You could argue that it's better though certainly not as funny. Still, there are some really strong moments that do recall the early days including the title track, a great snotty version of “House of the Rising Sun” and the rocking “I Got A Right”. There's no real reason for the group to have re-worked the three tracks from “Welcome To Reality” but they sound great.

(Frontier Records, S.O.S. Records)

ANORAK GIRL “Plastic Supermodel” 7"

ANORAK GIRL “Cyber Sex” 7”

Okay, they're not really a band. It's basically the alter ego of various people involved with Damaged Goods and Cuckooland/Shelley's Children. There's

not a whole lot to these records, but they are perfect little pop singles in a way. Totally disposable pop, every song is still candy sweet like an even MORE lo-fi Helen Love. If you don't know about Helen Love, imagine taking the Ramones, stripping the songs even further down, add a farfisa (or something) and the sweetest girl vocals since the Primitives. It's nothing. It's great.

(Damaged Goods)

ARMALITE “s/t” LP

I love these guys. We had the good fortune of playing with this group (who's pedigree includes Kill The Man, Adam Avec Package, Paint It Black, etc.) in Philly a few years back. Totally great modern punk with a heavy DC influence via Fuel. The sound is really big with huge riffs and great dual vocals that keep the whole thing solid. There can even be comparisons made to Dillinger Four with the drastic differences in the two different singers. Maybe a less drunk, more vegan D4?

There are some great straight up pop songs too. “Unfinished Business” and “Husker Dave” are extremely sing-along-able and the later makes great use of those Husker/folks/open chords. Now, if they would just hit the road...

(No Idea Records)

BE YOUR OWN PET “s/t” LP

So, I dig this record against my better judgment. You know, you hear about bands like this and you just think “ugh”. Then they wound up on Ecstatic Peace and you're like “ugh” times infinity. But it's cool. Thurston Moore seems like a pretty nice guy. What do I know?

Surely they know that “Wildcat” sounds a lot like Joy Division at the wrong speed. Now if you grant that premise, than this record kind of rocks. It's got that something that makes it, in a way, a classic rock record. It's classic punk rock. But there's something else going on that means that unless they do something drastic, they are destined to a future strictly in the underground. I mean, I dig that. I think it's cool that a band can make music that merely by its intent means it won't find a mainstream audience and yet it's very much a pop record.

The band is punky, I guess. It's a guitar band and it's not that post-punk stuff that young New York seems to have just discovered. The singer is like a spazz somewhere between Bikini Kill and Fred Schneider. I mean, they almost err on the side of art damage. But stay clear with a barrage of quick, catchy tunes.

I really didn't think I was gonna like this and I still don't really like looking at pictures of the group. I mean, they're all very cute. But, you know, “ugh”.

(Ecstatic Peace)

BEATLES “Alternative Revolver” LP

BEATLES “Abbey Road Outtakes And Demos” 2xLP

“Revolver” is one of my favorite records by the Beatles. I know that doesn't mean anything. Some people love them. Some people hate them. But with so many people able to make that statement it suddenly seems stupid to write.

So I bought this record thinking it would be like those “White Album” demo tapes with radically different, stripped down versions of the songs I knew or even an unreleased track. No, this is essentially the UK version of “Revolver” which I guess includes “I'm Only Sleeping”, “And Your Bird Can Sing” and “Doctor Robert”. I guess they might be different mixes and different takes. But they are not radically different from the versions I'm familiar with. The only real interesting bits are the one track demo take of “For No One” and the fairly common fucked up vocal track version of “Bird Can Sing”.

Still, it's “Revolver” and the “For No One” demo kinda makes it worthwhile if you're a sad, sad person like me.

On the other hand, the “Abbey Road Outtakes And Demos” double LP is awesome. Starting with an even more sparse take on “Come Together” enhanced by much more desperate, intense vocals from Lennon through the nearly six minute long improvised version of “Something” to the chaotic, psychedelic, original version of “The End”, this record is a real treat for the desperate Beatles fan who still thinks every note is a secret message. It's like being given another section of the Rosetta Stone!

There's another “Abbey Road” outtake record I have that takes a different approach. On this record, they take apart the medley and show all the elements of each individual song. It's cool and different from the other record I have that includes completely different versions of the completed medleys. Very interesting.

CHALLENGER CREW "Start In Den Tod" EP

In the pre-crossover days of European hardcore, there was a ton of great stuff out of Germany. I know it's hard to believe considering that whole music scene turned to shit by the end of the decade and has never really recovered. Maybe it was the birth of techno or rave music. I don't know, but the window for great German hardcore was small though plentiful. I never really liked stuff like Jingo De Lunch. I never understood the appeal. They were sort of the beginning of the end. German punk and hardcore was officially evolving into sort of boring rock music with metal influences. I dunno. I don't get that music. I think when you hear terms like "crossover" or "fusion" you should run away. It's as true for music as it is for food.

Challenger Crew was a great band. Not a ton of stuff out there and I don't think they were around for more than a couple of years. This EP is some of my favorite stuff of theirs. Starting with a strange little instrumental (how many hardcore bands can get away with an instrumental?) the band launch into some very European sounding hardcore. Powerful, and in some ways closer to American hardcore in arrangements than the UK, Challenger Crew sound like a crossbreeding of SOA and Akutt Innleggelse. On "Schneller, Lauter, Harter" the break between the intro and the body is a bass break that could have been lifted off of "New Day Rising". Six songs of classic German hardcore.

(Anti-Schelski Records)

CIBO MATTO "Viva! La Woman" CD

CIBO MATTO "Stereo Type A" CD

Cibo Matto were the queens of the nerd revolution in pop music. Let's face, one major aspect of pop music in the '90s was the rise of the nerd. In a lot of ways, emo is the ultimate manifestation of the nerd becoming fashionable and as we are now learning, teen nerds can be just as lame as the jocks. But that's a whole different story. Cibo Matto were nerds that were also very cute and made some compelling music if you gave it the chance. Japanese via New York, the group in some ways had more in common with late '90s Stereolab than with the New York experimental hip hop scene. Both albums are of the space age bachelor pad variety though they were a more literal attempt at the future as opposed to Stereolab who had more to do with what the past imagined of the future. I guess Cibo Matto avoided the irony and any hint of retro.

But that's not to say that Cibo Matto were humorless. There's something really funny about their thematic elements. "Viva! La Woman", who's cover and title are sorta reminiscent of Bongwater's "Power Of Pussy", is a concept record about the duo's fascination with food. With hits like the Cocteau like pop of "Sugar Water" (a song I will always associate with the episode where Buffy does the slutty dance) and the Beck like "Know Your Chicken" to a demented version of Anthony Newley's "The Candy Man", it's hard to call this record post-modern when it's so futuristic, it's more like lyrical topics are so overworked we're reduced to singing tributes to our favorite consumables.

I could be wrong but with the exception of an EP here or there the only other full length from Cibo Matto was '99's "Stereo Type A" and it seems appropriate that the group would end with the decade. The record sounds more like a band (as they had by then been playing with different drummers and Sean Lennon on bass) and it's hard to say if that was a step backwards or just a step in a different direction. Certainly, there is a different atmosphere to this record and Cibo Matto seem more like a group of individuals and less like the transmissions from space that made up "Viva!" There are a lot of jazzy elements to this record like on the hit "Spoon" though, like most electronica related jazz, it has more to do with '60s soft jazz or Brazilian kitsch moreso than the real deal. But they've got their feet in both camps with fellow traveler Arto Lindsay guesting on at least one track. Lots of Monty Norman type boisterous arrangements like on "Sci-Fi Wasabi" and the metal sludge of "Blue Train" is a nice way of saying "we like other stuff too".

(Warner Brothers)

DEATH ANGEL "The Ultra-Violence" LP

Growing up in Hawaii, there was a brief period of time when being into metal was really fun. It got lame again really quick, but there was a time when a bunch of us were trading Voivod demos and Destruction live tapes. It was before all the bands got really big and signed and basically got stupid. I can't stand most metal anymore. I just don't dig the scene and the big groups like Metallica and Slayer got embarrassing so quickly...

Death Angel were fucking amazing. Most of the early, underground metalheads in Hawaii were Filipino kids, so it seemed like Death Angel would be our Gods. Plus, they seemed like cool guys. They weren't big rock-n-roll douche bags, like all those in-your-face haoles. They were normal guys that

you could talk to like, I dunno, your cool cousins. Plus they were our age. When "The Ultra-Violence" came out, they were teenagers.

I love this album still. I really only like one Metallica record and I've always thought Slayer were massively overrated (I thought they were really boring when I saw them on the "Reign Of Blood" tour). It was the groups like Voivod and Death Angel that seemed to have less to lose and were free to do whatever crazy idea they had. There are some strange time signature changes on this record and, even though it would have helped them sell more records, they don't really on simple mosh parts on each song to sell it to the thrashers. Instead, there are some really complex arrangements and long before Metallica were writing their epics, here are some fast, metal songs with lots of switches and turnarounds.

That little break of "Voracious Soul" before the mayhem... how can you not do a little air guitar to that phrase? "Final Death" may not be the fastest song on the record, but something about that almost Discharge like intro is cool. You can imagine that this is what Kalv and the boys thought they were doing on "The More I See".

(Enigma Records)

DEFIANCE, OH "Share What Ya Got" LP

DEFIANCE, OH/GHOST MICE split CD

DEFIANCE, OH "The Great Depression" LP

I'm not crazy about this group, but it's all about me. I dunno. I don't really trust groups like Against Me for some reason. Until I meet a group in person, I'm always nervous about such earnestness. Hey, I was REALLY suspicious of Propagandhi until I met those guys and immediately hit it off. Ditto for Pipebomb. Maybe I'll meet Defiance, OH and hit it off. Plus, I feel weird about group's namechecking stuff like Jawbreaker. Maybe I was just a little too close to ground zero.

In the meantime, I'm taking these records at face value. The warbly vocals, the shaky structure, the scratchy fiddle... I love that shit. They're doing something I used to try to do and gave up on because I was such a failure. Maybe that's why I'm a little suspicious of them. But "Share What Ya Got" is a great record that weirdly sounds like it's out of control and falling apart even though I can't identify any of those actual fissures. "Chad's Favorite Song" seems silly at first until you let yourself go with it. "Bikes And Bridges", I mean, I could hate this song on another day. I really dig this at the moment.

Their split with Ghost Mice is even more low tech which really works on sing-a-longs like "Things We Say". Maybe the muddier recordings takes some of the edge off of those earnest, but good, vocals. It's easier for my old ears to respond to this one. Even Ghost Mice are okay though I still think they're a bit of a poor man's Mountain Goats (and that's still pretty good).

Luckily there aren't any huge musical changes on "The Great Depression" though the production is better. It's like all the rough edges are getting softened which is good for a group like this. You know who they sound like at time? You will think this is crazy. But songs like "Enough" and "This Feels Better" sorta sound like the Dead Milkmen. I swear it's true. Okay, for now, I dig this band a lot. Hopefully there are no multi-national corporations out there waiting to make them an offer they can't refuse.

(Friends And Relatives, Plan-It-X, No Idea Records)

DELANEY AND BONNIE "Home" LP

DELANEY AND BONNIE "Accept No Substitute" LP

DELANEY AND BONNIE "To Bonnie From Delaney" LP

DELANEY AND BONNIE "Motel Shot" LP

Bonnie Bramlett rocks. Not only did she make some great albums with husband Delaney, but she was a real groundbreaker. She was the first white Iketta as a teen singing back-ups for Ike and Tina Turner. She's got a soulful gravelly voice that sure inspired Janis Joplin and others. Plus, she beat the crap out of Elvis Costello in 1979 when Costello called Ray Charles a "blind, ignorant nigger".

For a couple of white kids living in Hollywood, they had the soul, blues and gospel down. There's something very real about their delivery and it must have been obvious to the right people. Their debut record was made for Stax, for fuck's sake. This got them rocking with the immortal Booker T and the MGs producing some great music that was the album "Home". One real highlight was the Big Momma Thornton classic "Piece Of My Heart". While it was made famous years later by Janis Joplin, the Delaney and Bonnie version is much more bluesy and the vocal delivery is scorching. Theirs is the true template for the rock and blues crossover that made Joplin's version seem so natural and seamless.

"Accept No Substitute" has that classic early '70s soul sound. It's especially pronounced on the opening track, "Get Ourselves Together" and

"Ghetto". There's so much melody woven in with the grit as well as a sort of surprisingly sweet horn section. Very densely recorded, the album probably sounded ancient from the day it was released.

Tom Dowd was the man. Like most of the classic Clapton stuff and a lot of classic jazz, he recorded the third Delaney and Bonnie album, "To Bonnie From Delaney" (they had a live album too, but I don't really count it as it was really just a Clapton love fest as he was sitting in with the band at the time). The album is hugely different from "Substitute" as the sound is clear as a bell. Suddenly there were dimensions in the instrumentation letting the vocals find more subtle areas like on the beautiful "God Knows I Love You". Bonnie especially lets loose on this record with the powerful gospel track "Lay Down My Burden" and "The Love Of My Man".

I really love "Motel Shots". It's loose and fun and totally acoustic. If you ever saw the movie "Almost Famous", there's a scene where they walk through a hotel and there's a man and woman in one room harmonizing vocally while the guy strums his guitar. Allegedly that was meant to be Delaney and Bonnie who were known for unwinding after a show by playing music with friends. Much more gospel heavy, there's some great piano playing from Leon Russell. The record is mostly originals all of which have roots in classic gospel with the one exception of a raucous rendition of "Rock Of Ages".

They put together one more album called "D and B Together" with some of their most accessible material. It seems like they should have been a huge hit as it was the perfect music for the time. The lead off track is a great Dave Mason cover of "Only You Know And I Know" (originally released on the live album with Clapton).

The duo split up soon after with the end of their marriage.

(Stax, Elektra, Atco, CBS)

DESECRATION "Who's In Control" 12"

DESECRATION/SUBVERSE split LP

DESECRATION "Who's In Control" 7"

I had never even heard of Mesa until Desecration came along. I remember there one page in Maximum Rock N Roll and thought, this is a band I should know. I wrote a letter to Jack, went out to visit him in Arizona, and the rest was history; Cringer and Hippycore were joined at the hip.

At the time of the release of their blistering "Who's In Control" 12", the new wave of thrash in England seemed like the most exciting thing happening in underground music. Concrete Sox, Heresy, Ripcord, Doom... it was all fucking cool and had the same excitement that metal had for a few months with most of my friends trading demo recordings and live tapes. Best of all, these folks were right on punks. You could write to Lee Dorian and he would send you his fanzine and a bunch of REALLY poorly made stickers! In that short period of time after hardcore but before grindcore, the first Desecration record was the avant-garde. Fast as fuck, and loud too, the songs were further removed from the notion of rock 'n' roll even beyond Discharge. Most of the songs like "Macho Man" and the title track were a series of fast paced changes over a simple but passionate rant. Every song was totally intense.

There were a lot of expectations for the group's follow up split with Canada's Subverse. I never knew much about Subverse and the split was an arbitrary decision as the two bands were unaware of each other before Manic Ears suggested the collaboration. Honestly, I really only ever listened to the Desecration side. While the group were pretty disappointed about the way the record was mixed (none of the band members were there for the mixing session) it was still pretty potent. Even faster than the first 12", the band were branching out experimenting more with crossover and getting even deeper into the anti-authoritarian politics obvious on the lead off track, "Nationalist Evolution". The record is also the first appearance of the band's best song, "In A Child's Eye". Not their fastest number, it rocks like "Animosity" era COC.

The best thing about the Desecration 7" reissue of "Who's In Control" is the live flexi it comes with. Four live versions that are especially worthwhile on "Nationalist Evolution". Who is in control? Death is in control!

(Manic Ears, TPC Records)

DRAKE, NICK "Five Leaves Left" LP

DRAKE, NICK "Bryter Layter" LP

DRAKE, NICK "Pink Moon" LP

The first time I heard Nick Drake, it was at one of THOSE parties. What kind of party uses Nick Drake as mood music, right? To be honest, though I knew the name as one of those names I was supposed to know, I had never heard his music. I thought it was some unreleased Sentridoh thing I had never heard. What do I know?

I don't get romantic about suicide. I think it's bullshit and the notion of it being romantic (even the gesture itself) is so bourgeois I feel sick every time I see a James Dean poster up in somebody's apartment. So the fact that Nick Drake is a tragic figure if anything should be a detractor for me. But of his three official LPs, there's not a bad moment on any of them. Assuming you can get with the British folk tradition, there are no records that come close with the rare exceptions of a few Donovan tracks, a few Sandy Denny moments and "I Want To See The Bright Lights". These records aren't just fun for the cult side hunters. All three records are pretty fantastic.

I love all three of his albums. "Five Leaves Left" is much more subdued than most music historians would have you believe. Subtle string arrangements never dominate the pretty acoustic guitar sounds and Nick Drake is one of the few examples I can think of where you really feel like an acoustic guitar is well recorded. So much folk music is barely adequate when it comes to getting guitar sounds. Perhaps the overall sound is Richard Thompson's greatest contribution to this record. It's amazing how on songs like "Three Hours" such different picking styles can be run in series without distracting from the dusky beauty that makes this whole record so appealing. When the guitars vanish, the music is just as powerful. The strings on "Way To Blue" could be the record's highlight and a pre-digital inspiration to some of the better This Mortal Coil moments.

"Bryter Layter" may be my favorite of the three records as it's played out as if Fairport Convention took a weird detour to a darker place. "Hazey Jane II" comes out of the gates like one of those very British folk pop songs, like Donovan fronting the Byrds. But the strange but appealing horn arrangement takes it somewhere very different. There's almost something positively American about it, and with that I mean the good part of being American (it's almost funky). Even the corny sax solo on "At The Chime of A City Clock" is so strange in this context mixed with the sentimental string section that it doesn't offend like it would on, say, Billy Joel's "Glass Houses". "One Of These Things First" is one of the record's understated highlights with its nice sounding piano. Again, the interesting arrangement with the occasional surprising choice of notes is both familiar and out of place, in a good way.

A lot has been made about "Pink Moon" as the record that established Drake as a cult figure. A really odd record (short songs, short record, grim content) it's a shame that the morbid fascination with his suicide has maybe directed any analysis of this record into searching for clues as to his depression. Was this his suicide note? Were there warning signs? It really is too bad. Because this record is fascinating, a break from his previous records, and no more grim than it is evocative, it's worth looking at outside of the context of Drake's life. The lyrical tone of the record may be a reflection of what was going on with him. But they also are perfect in creating a mood that settles you in for the pretty songs. The simplest production (vocals and guitar, maybe a little piano), its minimalist folk. With only three tracks stretching outside of the three minute mark, some of the shorter numbers seem to end before they begin. It's almost startling when the title track ends. It's self-conscious songwriting to the millionth degree. Even the instrumental "Horn" is so self-conscious that rather than add his voice, a high guitar string sings the lead. "Know" seems to be the only break, a song that might have actually been written for fun.

I don't understand people that get off on music just because the singer killed himself. There are some grim Joy Division songs but I think of some of my favorites to be totally ecstatic. Nick Drake was a complicated person, no doubt, but I didn't know him and you probably didn't either. Death tripping on his suicide whether it's for some art damage, cynicism or analytical self-righteousness is all voyeurism. These are great records and that has nothing to do with a guy killing himself.

(Island Records)

DUH "Blowhard" LP

When I was working at Rough Trade, I mean, that place was a sinking ship. Every day another salesperson would split, people were stealing shit left and right out of the warehouse. I had a lot of respect for Rough Trade because of their history. But everyone knew they were going out of business. Donna Dresch was my pal and she left to go work for Revolver / Scooby Doo. For some reason, she took me with her and I wound up being their first salesperson other than the owner. Even though I was a drunk, young, punk, fuck up, it was a cool job with too much responsibility for a kid like me and I loved it. It was one of my favorite jobs ever.

Gary owned Revolver, Scooby Doo, Communion, Tupelo and Tom ran Boner. They were great. I really liked those guys. When they started a band, I wanted to help any way I could. Duh were the epitome of those times. Drunk. Smart. Hilarious. The fact that Tom is a great guitar

player (hey, the guy was in Fang) and they got Mike from Steel Pole to play bass was a huge bonus. Bob (formerly of Bum Kon if you can believe it) was their super charismatic and hilarious singer.

I went to every show and even set a couple of them up. They were hilarious live and I think my favorite shows were the conceptual ones. Once they dumped their whole set and wrote a bunch of cheesy pop songs when they opened for Jawbreaker. They all wore suits and played clean pop music. Between songs Bob would talk about "love" and how distortion on guitars was a crutch. Another great show was at Epicenter Zone. Deep in punk territory, they used their set to mock the kids and mimic them introducing every song of the set with "this next song is for the LAPD..." On one of the shows on their West Coast tour with the Cows and Rocket From The Crypt, they had a big score board where you could tally each members musical clams as the show went on. While that didn't do much for Gary's confidence, it was really funny.

"Blowhard" is the only real Duh record. It's great. It's a bunch of noise that is actually more reminiscent of the Cows or early Butthole Surfers than that of Tom or Mike or even Gary's other bands. If you described this record as members of Fang, Melvins, Star Pimp, Steel Pole Bath Tub, Bum Kon, Folk Implosion, you would still not have a clue as to what Duh sounded like.

It's definitely based in garage rock. But the guitars are just ridiculous. Tom and Mike are both guitar gods to me and I totally mean that. Especially during this time, the start of the '90s, everything they did was awe inspiring. That this record is really fucking funny is a bonus. One song is aimed at a certain, rockin' shitworker at Maximum Rock N Roll with most of the lyrics made up from his more absurd record reviews. "Balls out blow out and they're chicks!" I think this record is as good as those early Cows records and if that ain't your cup of tea, you can surely at least appreciate the humor and the Tarot chart for each band member in the liner notes.

(Boner Records)

EVEN AS WE SPEAK "Nothing Ever Happens" 7"

EVEN AS WE SPEAK "One Step Forward" 7"

EVEN AS WE SPEAK "Beautiful Day" 7"

EVEN AS WE SPEAK "Feral Pop Frenzy" LP

EVEN AS WE SPEAK "Blue Eyes Deceiving Me" 7"

Call me a charlatan, but I didn't know anything about Sarah Records until I started working at Revolver in 1990 and the first two groups I fell in love with were Heavenly and Even As We Speak. You know, I've never even seen their earlier, pre-Sarah 7"s, but I really loved Even As We Speak. "Nothing Ever Happens" is the first I heard. Sweet pop with boy/girl vocals that at times was very Smiths-like and at other times totally Talulah Gosh. The super simple recordings were very New Zealand / Flying Nun-ish, kinda like the Verlaines or the Clean. I totally heart their cover of New Order's "Bizarre Love Triangle" kicking ass over the version Frente would do a few years later.

"One Step Forward" is more great pop, though at times, it's almost goth. I dunno. Maybe it's the darker tone of songs like "Must Be Something Else". "Best Kept Secret" is the kind of great pop song that made collecting indie pop singles as fun as collecting hardcore records.

The next single was sort of a promo release for their debut LP. "Beautiful Day" is the most polished song the group had released to that point. With added keys, there's more of a retro feel to this one. It's hard not to compare indie pop with a girl singer with a super sweet voice to the Primitives. It's not really texturally like them. But it's got such a '60s pop undercurrent, it's hard to ignore the similarities.

Like the previous 7", the group's first (and I think only) LP is a polished pop record. The rudimentary drumming is replaced by something altogether more confident. In fact, the performances over all are stronger and fuller. Overdubs make them sound like superstars. But the great pop songs remain. "Falling Down The Stairs" is perfect pop. "Anybody Anyway" is a pretty, folksy waltz, the kind of thing that often falls flat for sparse pop groups. Works here. "Love Is the Answer" is great, mid-period Kinks like pop. Plus, a couple of the singles pop here again.

Even As We Speak's final record is the only one that's at all a departure from their indie pop style. "(All You Find Is) Air" lives somewhere between Portishead and Heavenly, it's more '60s style pop with that modern beat. Sometimes I love the sax thinking it sounds like ABC or something. Other times it's just too Sanborn for me. Either way, it's blown out of your ears by "Getting Faster", their most power pop punk moment. Ultimately, they're all pretty essential indie pop singles.

(Sarah Records)

FIGHTING DOGS "s/t" LP

FIGHTING DOGS "tour" CD-R

As unlikely as it may sound, though stranger things have happened, J Church were lucky enough to have gotten to play with Fighting Dogs in the short time that they were a band. In the basement of a little pizza place in Denton, they blew the doors off of the place. Huge and powerful without sounding clumsy or too dense.

The self-titled LP is a great encapsulation of that sound. Huge and powerful, the band never relies on metallic gimmickry but are in fact like a much more blend of heavy music with hardcore. They're like a more uptempo version of From Ashes Rise with elements of "Getting The Fear" era Poison Idea. Take that and subtract wanky solos and that thin sound metal guitars with too much gain suffer from. It's great.

The five song tour CD-R is even more impressive. Take everything I said about the LP and add a weird swinging AC/DC vibe for a moment. Starting with a fast track, this EP is certainly more immediate than the group's debut. Harmonized guitars are reminiscent of King Diamond while still sounding full and deep. "The Witching" is my favorite track with it's big intro. I know that more than one person has told me that they remind them of Tragedy. I can see that in terms of some of the production value. But musically, if anything, it's like the second Neurosis record. (Ebullition Records)

FINALLY PUNK "s/t" 7"

I've only seen this band once, but I think they're my favorite band in Austin at the moment. They are certainly the most interesting musically. I often get really despondent living in this town and the music scene is part of why I feel like moving. But Finally Punk are great and I'm sort of shocked that considering there are a lot of interesting people in this town that there aren't more adventurous bands of this nature.

Finally Punk, in some ways, are perfectly fitted with this later KRS, post-post punk thing that's happening in the underground. More in tune with groups like Erase Errata or Mika Miko (both great groups) and less to do with stuff like the Liars or Black Dice (who I couldn't care less about), Finally Punk are as much about fun as they are about subversion. Each song could be a page from the Guided Missile catalog; short and, uh, angular. They manage to cram about a dozen songs on this EP, which is a whole live set for a group like this.

The fact that they are shamelessly amateurish is a big bonus. Live and on record, every song sounds like it's on the edge of total collapse. It's the kind of wonder that makes the Raincoats sound like Rush. There are even moments when the songs might almost be getting annoying. Before you have time to be bothered, it's over. I've listened to this record 10 times since I got it. I can't wait to hear more. I really hope they some day record that fucked up Nirvana cover they did live. (Wonk Records)

FOLEY, ELLEN "Spirit Of St. Louis" LP

I liked Ellen Foley even before she started dating Mick Jones of the Clash. I dunno. It's stupid, but I sort of liked "Paradise By The Dashboard Light" by Meatloaf. I think it was because my grandmother, who I would fight with about these things all the time, really hated him. I remember watching some lame TV performance of him singing "Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad". My grandmother took one look and said, disgusted, "this is narcotic music."

When Ellen Foley split from Meatloaf, she did a so-so first solo LP that included the fun, super-melodramatic song "We Belong To The Night" which is sort of somewhere between Bruce Springsteen and Pat Benatar. One thing was for sure, as much as that record was corny, her voice was totally amazing.

Now, nobody cares about this record. Considering the mad scramble for all things Clash, even some of their shitty later b-sides, you can still find this album for a couple bucks everywhere. I just bought a copy for \$2.99. It was a steal.

A lot of people know the story of "Sandinista". The Clash spent a year, while on tour, recording at every free moment. The result was hours and hours of material. They took what they thought was some of the best moments and made the "Sandinista" triple LP. But there was more stuff out there and some of it was pretty decent. That's partly what makes up this record.

In some ways, they were returning the favor. Ellen Foley sings the lead on the first single off of "Sandinista", "Hitsville UK" which is actually my favorite song on the record. "Spirit Of St. Louis", quietly, is the Clash with Foley singing. Mick Jones and Joe Strummer play guitar, Topper plays drums and the bass playing is split between Norman from Ian Dury and the Blockheards and Paul Simonon who also split the bass playing duties on "Sandinista". The recording was done by Clash engineer, Bill Price and the

photos were shot by Pennie Smith who did most of the Clash record covers. The credits also list "produced by my boyfriend", meaning Jones who also did some vocals.

With Strummer-Jones writing half of the songs and Tymon Dogg contributing another three tracks, the record is really in the spirit of "Sandinista". Oddly enough, none of the songs feel like they grew out of some great jam session. There are some pretty solid pop songs here that at times even sound like a stripped down Abba. I guess the tone, for a Clash reference, is something like "Corner Soul", "If The Music Could Talk", "Street Parade" sort of stuff. In fact, at times it's reminiscent of the better Mescaleros stuff.

It's not the greatest record in the world. But it's enjoyable and a neat artifact for Clash archaeologists. Of course, Foley then started acting and made something of a name for herself on the TV show "Night Court". I dunno.

(Epic)

FRIENDS OF DISTINCTION "Best Of..." CD

Man, I love that late '60s and '70s soul. Friends of Distinction get written off at times as a lame pop group. But I love them. Their take on Hugh Masakela's "Grazin' in the Grass" is worthy of the original masterpiece.

Formed by Harry Elston and Floyd Butler, two former Ray Charles players who cut their teeth with the Hi-Fi's (Charles's backing band that at times also included Marilyn McCoo). Teaming up with Jessica Cleaves and Barbara Jean Love, the group became the pop soul group Friends of Distinction.

I love this era of music because it's so much like punk for collectors in that there was a real emphasis on singles. There were a lot of great LPs. But you really think of the singles and Friends of Distinction are a good example of that. I was never really blown away by their LPs. But those hits are amazing making this collection much more worthy than some record label trying to cull a "greatest hits" out of John Coltrane or the Clash.

The aforementioned "Grazin'" starts off this collection on a high. But the darker, moody "Going In Circles" is my favorite of the group's three major hits. Great string arrangement with the descending bass creates a melancholy feel on this waltz ballad.

Completely switching gear, the group's third major single, "Love or Let Me Be Lonely" is a pop classic with hints of some of the best Dion Warwick / Burt Bacharach collaborations. A lesser hit, "Time Waits for No One" has similar pop soul feel with a closer relationship to the Philly sound maybe like a rawer version of the Spinners.

Over twenty tracks, the group knows what works and none of the songs go on longer than necessary. This is a collection of very precise elements in soul and pop, usually mixing both. Sometimes the group is described as jazz and soul but I think that has more to do with resumes as jazz doesn't really have much to do with this simple but exhilarating pop music.

(RCA)

HARD SKIN / FUCKED UP split 7"

I had never heard of Fucked Up before this record. But what do I know? Street punk from who knows where that is remarkably like the Cockney Rejects in some respects. Very rough around the edges with brutal vocals. Sounds good up against the melodic guitar lines though there's nothing "pop" about this track.

Hard Skin do my all-time favorite Blitz track, "New Age". I love that new wave-y EP even though for most people it was the beginning of the end for that group. One of the greatest Oi choruses of all time, this track is as much an inspiration as "Blind Justice" from the Business or "England Belongs To Me" by Cocksparrer. The Hard Skin version isn't especially better than the Blitz version. But it's always good to hear this song. They also cover "1-2-3" by the Professionals, one of the great tracks to be left off of "I Didn't See It Coming", and speed it up making it a bit more urgent. The Professionals were a greatly underrated post-Pistols outfit and maybe this will stir up some new interest and get a "Fabulous Stains" soundtrack in the works.

(No Future?)

LIFE SENTENCE "s/t" LP

Life Sentence were a great '80s hardcore band that first entered my consciousness when I saw them at Fender's in Long Beach. They were opening this crazy show with MDC, 7 Seconds and Verbal Assault. By the time they made it out West on this tour, the band had booted their lead vocalist. I didn't know this at the time and checked out the album anyway.

To this day, it's one of the great hardcore records of the time

(1986/87?). The first track, "Problems" is the best with it's more restrained guitar playing and great lead vocals. Sort of like a more agro Sluggo, the group rip through 10 straight forward songs that, I dunno, I suppose that if this came out today I wouldn't really notice it. It's hard to say. When the vocals are great, it's like early 7 Seconds or something. This record is definitely strongest at it's most melodic and least metal.

It's funny, because when I saw them live I remember thinking they were kind of like Dr. Know. But I like this a lot more. (Walkthrufyre Records)

MANIC STREET PREACHERS "The Holy Bible" LP

Yes, they're totally ridiculous and I don't really get it. But I loved those first few singles and, what can I say? I love this record. It's punky. It's pop. It's at least pretending to be smart. It's heavy. It's a real downer.

I don't usually go for this sort of self-destructive shit. Partly because it's usually a pose but also because I hate romanticizing self-destruction. This record manages to epitomize both of those things, and I love it. I don't know what to say. The songs are really great and something about the icy tone of the singers voice makes it a weirdly appealing record to me.

"Yes" is a great pop song about a heavy, Selby-like subject. The samples throughout the record are more like early Butthole Surfers than the Clash-like pop of the Manics. "Revol" is like a throwback to Factory Records. "Faster" is the best track on the record. It's unusual, almost like a suicidal Skids. This record captures a time in London for me. (Epic Records)

MECHT MENSCH / TAR BABIES split cassette

MECHT MENSCH "Acceptance" EP

Both Mecht Mensch and the Tar Babies started life as great Midwestern hardcore bands, uniquely American in sound, with something of an East Coast early '80s sound to them (not especially melodic but not exactly tuneless). I don't really know the whole story about why both groups were connected at the hip, but I get the impression they maybe shared members from time to time. Either way, they were pretty close and though very distinctly separate in character, had similar approaches to writing hardcore.

I've never heard the first Mecht Mensch demo tape, but their second release, a split with the Tar Babies includes several tracks I assume rerecorded including the Faith-like thrash of "Zoned Out" and "Wasted Youth". It could just be me looking for these things. But the singer has something of an Alec MacKaye quality to his voice. The Tar Babies tracks are also crazy, spastic hardcore like a high speed version of the Angry Samoans. It's noisy and the songs structurally have little resemblance to rock and roll (both bands). It's fast as hell and super tight. Both of those fuzzy guitars sound great. Like a little amp way too loud with a shitty fuzz box.

Both bands wound up on a couple of amazing compilations. Mecht Mensch found their way onto the "Barefoot and Pregnant" cassette released by Reflex (Husker Du's label) featuring five tracks still in the hardcore vein alongside Husker Du, the Replacements and others. Both groups appeared on the "Meathouse" compilation put out by seminal '80s Mid West label Version Sound (who put out the first Die Kreuzen) along with the Minutemen, Sin 34 and more.

All released in 1982, Mecht Mensch also released their one and only 7", "Acceptance". Five tracks of raw punk and hardcore, the group was already starting to evolve with some interesting slower material. It's all pretty intense still with the group getting more and more into dissonant guitar chords which is always a good thing.

In 1983 both groups wound up on a few classic compilation records like the second Master Tapes (with Zero Boys, Violent Apathy, etc.) and the first "We Got Power" album (with just about everyone else in the world).

I sort of lost track of the Tar Babies. I vaguely remember seeing them (or did Cringer play with them in LA?) once or twice and immediately knowing where they fit in that second generation of SST bands. I dunno. I might like it more now if I were to go back and give it another chance. Mecht Mensch split up. I wonder if anyone will ever get all of their material together for a CD release. If you asked me that ten years ago I would have thought it impossible. But who knows? There is a new hardcore revivalist market today. (Bone Air)

MENTAL, THE "Extended Play" LP

The second release from Demo Tapes is as great as the first though in a totally different territory. Whether you are into anarcho punk or KBD, the first 7" by the Mental is one of the few rarities you will probably never find. The

band featuring Dick Lucas, pre-Subhumans, barking out the most primitive punk ever is totally unique, totally cacophonous, garage punk. Only a few hundred pressed, I've never even seen this record. A second EP was also recorded though never released as the band split when they finished school.

Since then, Bluurg has put out some interesting CDR compilations one of which includes all of these recordings. I don't know about you, but as much as I want to love the populism of CDRs, they just don't have much weight with me. Plus, the Bluurg discs were mostly for trainspotters as the MP3 style quality wasn't ideal.

So working with Demo Tapes, all of the Mental recordings have been documented on this fantastic 12" EP. Eight amazingly raw punk anthems in the way that really represent "raw punk". A lot of record reviews say "raw punk" and when you listen to it you get some slick metallic sounding production. This is fucking raw. The band sound like they're about to collapse in a heap with every track. It's not really much like the Subhumans (who benefit from being extremely tight). But it's fantastic in a different way.

(Demo Tapes)

MIDNITERS, THEE "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love" EP
MIDNITERS, THEE "I Found A Peanut/Love Special Delivery" 7"
MIDNITERS, THEE "Jump, Jive and Harmonize/Thee Midnite Feeling" 7"
MIDNITERS, THEE "Greatest" CD

As much as Thee Midniters are part of the subculture of '60s garage snobs, the band were a key band to East LA life in the '60s and through the present. In the same way white America still has room for "You Really Got Me" or "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction", the music of Thee Midniters lives on through that nation within a nation of the barrio. From the Zeroes to Los Lobos, Thee Midniters set the tone.

It's great that Norton Records would bother to reissue a handful of tracks on vinyl. Original Midniters vinyl is still out there if you look. But it's nice to have something new in your hands and these records nicely capture some of the groups most rockin' moments. "Jump, Jive and Harmonize" with its faux "Jumping Jack Flash" guitar riff has more impact than the Stones. "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love" rocks with a Standells sorta vibe while "Love Special Delivery" is the most "soulful" of this trio of 7" vinyl.

But these records are only half of the story. Thee Midniters were a great garage band, but they were more complex. Their garage rock was born out of soul and r and b, as was a lot of garage. But their understanding of, interpretation of that music was much deeper than any other group. Hence, some of their most lasting music isn't typically garage at all. "Greatest" is a CD collection of everything and you can contrast the garage hits (including their great version of "Land of a Thousand Dances" which was the closest thing to a national hit they had) with their more soulful moments. The disc also includes one of my favorite garage stompers by the group, a really fucking whipping instrumental called "Whittier Blvd", sort of a theme song for cruising.

It could be argued that their most important song was "Dreaming Casually", a hit in East LA that, along with a few other tracks, came to represent a time and place in Latino history. This evocative soul ballad is in its own way nostalgic and existential. I can listen to this song every day. "Making Ends Meet" is another incredible original that should have been a national hit on the level of "Natural High".

I actually find the slower soul ballads, the cover versions, the most powerful Midniters material. "Sad Girl" is beautiful. "Giving up on Love" is too. "The Town I Live In" speaks volumes.

Any Thee Midniters is worth having and those Norton reissues on vinyl are well worth picking up. It would be cool if someone would also acknowledge their more soulful elements. How cool would a "Dreaming Casually / Sad Girl" 7" be?

(Norton Records, Thump)

NEGAZIONE "Mucchio Selvaggio" cassette

NEGAZIONE "Tutti Pazzi" 7"

NEGAZIONE "Condannati A Morte Nel Vostro Quietro Vivere" 7"

NEGAZIONE "Lo Spirito Continua" LP

The '80s were a fantastic time for European hardcore and no scene was as awe inspiring as Italy's. Aside from a slew of fantastic bands, there was an exciting sense that someone across the world had the same feelings you did. While the US scene was dying off with violence and repetition, it was great to know that someone had found new life in hardcore.

Negazione were one of the best of that scene and their initial volley of material is why. The groups first release was a split tape with Declino titled "Mucchio Selvaggio". Unlike most demo tapes, this one was

recorded as if it were an LP. Great production for a hardcore record, it was raw and totally over the top. It set the standard for the next few Negazione releases with frantic, screamed vocals that weren't metal or hardcore. It really sounded like someone who had lost control. Ditto for the music. The frantic pace was barely held together with spastic guitar breaks that sounded like Black Flag on the wrong speed. The tape would later be released by COR in England who always had pretty good taste. Not sure who did the cover art, but it certainly is reminiscent of Brian Walsby with a big pile up of punkers drawn in black and white.

In 1985, two years after forming, the group sorted out their debut 7", "Tutti Pazzi". I actually thought this record was self-titled but everyone else calls it "Tutti Pazzi" and what the hell do I know. The five song EP was another blast of manic hardcore. Continuing off from the cassette, the simple yet clear production made this a really powerful record. The cover is a photo of a kid sitting down with head down in a weird way reminiscent of that Minor Threat cover.

"Condannati A Morte Nel Vostro Quietro Vivere" was the record that first got most people in North America interested in the group. Self-released, the five-song EP was more in the direction of the previous records. At times indulging more of their Black Flag influences, the crazy hardcore style was still there. At times it seemed like they may have wanted to be more of a speed metal group with the crazy lead breaks. But a mixture of raw production and lack of a typical metal approached made them into something much more interesting. Billy from Half-Off's New Beginnings label would reissue the 7" in the states as "Nightmare" with a live version of "Tutti Pazzi" replacing "Ancora Qui".

For me, the last great Negazione recording was their debut LP, "Lo Spirito Continua". Released simultaneously by De Konkurrent in Holland, TVOR in Italy and Mordam in the States, the ten-song LP already hints that group was settling down into a more rock/metal zone. While most of the manic hardcore stuff was gone, there was still a lot of intensity with the vocals that kept the record interesting. You could also feel that the group was still feeling new and excited about playing music. While probably the least interesting of their earliest releases, the album is still very powerful and especially if you can take it out of the context of their early stuff, is a quintessential piece of the Euro hardcore puzzle.

(Subvert, TVOR)

PINK RAZORS "Scene Suicide" CDEP

PINK RAZORS "Waiting To Wash Up" LP

I was told I had to see this group, so when I found out they were playing at a tiny club during the Fest, with no real stage, a poor sound system and way, way too many people, I was there.

I was told they were like a DIY version of old Superchunk. There is some truth to that. They're catchy as hell and they're miles above most other DIY pop punk that floats around these days. I think they are almost like Crimpshrine or the poppy early Seaweed stuff. They're defo great and there is a big difference between their two records.

"Waiting To Wash Up" is great raw punk that is endlessly melodic. Nowadays, I guess the kids don't really think of this as punk at all seeing as everything is so sub-divided and I don't think any of the Pink Razors have big stupid hair. "Sew It Seams" is a great song that especially demonstrates how they can rock out and be melodic at the same time.

I usually pretty much totally hate CDEPs but I sure as fuck wasn't going to try and buy the tape! But this is great. So totally great. This just sounds so much livelier and cleaner than the LP. Imagine taking all that energy and melody and cleaning it up. Maybe it's a different studio. Maybe it's better gear. I dunno. It's a great, great record and "Couple Skate" is fantastic!

(Robotic Empire)

PRIMITIVES, THE "Peel Sessions" 7"

PRIMITIVES, THE "The Coventry Demo" LP

The Primitives were so great, I loved collecting records from this band. I really think Sean is right that collecting pop records recaptured the same feel of collecting punk records. It was so fun seeing all the different Primitives 7"s and weird giveaways like shampoo and chocolates. It was just a bonus that their music was perfect female fronted pop music that I've always wanted to play. Why aren't there any great British sounding pop female vocalists in the States?

The three tracks from the Peel Session are second album era material. It's not as punky and great as the first record. But if we didn't know about "Thru The Flowers" and "Crash" we would think this stuff was perfect. "Things Get In Your Way" is a great pop song that could have been a single. I'm not even sure if was on either of their albums. This new

version of "Way Behind Me" is the real highlight of the record taking all those great pop elements and mixing it with the amazing BBC studios.

The Primitives were from Coventry like the Specials. I've never been there, but there must be some great radio or something there for two drastically different bands to have such a great sense of melody. This demo will make any Primitives fan freak out. Especially if you are more inclined towards raw punk stuff anyway, these rough and ready versions of "Thru The Flowers", "Across My Shoulder" and "Stop Killing Me" are fucking amazing. Almost too predictably the group run through a Jesus And Mary Chain-like fuzzed out cover of "As Tears Go By". There's even a crazy Ramones-y version of "Crash". This is an amazing record.

(boots)

PROFESSIONALS, THE "I Didn't See It Coming" LP

I remember hearing "Little Boys" on the KTUH punk show and reading about Jones and Cook's new group in Trouser Press. I was even thrilled at the cover. Maybe it was just me. But I remember thinking there was no other record cover like it. I wasn't even sure if I liked it.

Now, when this record came out, 1981, I was pretty much deep into SoCal hardcore and was pretty non-plus-ed by this record. I loved "Little Boys" but the rest of the record sounded like weak versions of the non-Rotten Swindle tracks. A year later, I would see Jones for real playing at the 50th State Fair with a sad group called Chequered Past (who should have been super cool with Nigel Harrison and Clem Burke or Blondie, one of the Sales brothers and Mr. Pamela Des Barres) and that was the end of my fascination with any non-Rotten related post-Pistols projects.

There is certainly a little filler on this record and Jones's voice, while great at times, can be just horrible on songs like "Friday Night Square". But the record has more than it's share of great power pop as good as "Silly Thing" or anything by the Rich Kids. "Little Boys" still rocks even harder than I remember and is great (though I have to admit it makes me suddenly feel very sentimental). "The Magnificent" and "Payola" are also fantastic pop songs with chimey guitars that actually remind me a lot of the second Partisans LP. Subway Sect were a pretty underrated band and bassist Paul Meyers and rhythm guitarist Ray McVeigh do a good job here.

People always talk about there being some sort of Chuck Berry thing to Jones and the Pistols. People say that about this record too. I don't see that anywhere. They weren't rewriting rock 'n' roll. But they were as much a good pop group as they were a rock band. But, fuck, that sax is awful.

(Virgin)

SEA URCHINS "Pristine Christine" 7"

SEA URCHINS "Solace" 7"

SEA URCHINS "A Morning Odyssey" 7"

SEA URCHINS "Stardust" LP

I know they had other records. But I only ever really followed their releases on Sarah Records. I love this band and "Pristine Christine" is the kind of perfect, sweet pop that made thousands of people know that there were some great singles about to show up in the racks. This fantastic, jangle-pop record seems like the perfect way to debut the labels singles catalog. All three tracks amazing pop that genuinely makes you think of the '80s more than the '60s.

"Solace" is a bit more '60s sounding with the more prominent keyboards. It's almost got a garage/psych feel to it. But the chorus reminds you that they are a pop group and the sweet b-side "Please Rain Fall"... well, that kind of song title says it all.

"A Morning Odyssey" is the most advanced of their records with that sort of Walker Brothers type of warm production. I don't know how to explain it. It is equal parts Byrds, Beach Boys and, in this case, Pastels. Once again, the b-side is now throwaway with "Wild Grass Pictures" packing quite a punch for a lo-fi slow number.

"Stardust" is for the most part a collection of all the previous records. But it is still worth tracking down for the four extra tracks. "Day Into Day" has a little guitar riff almost dying to burst into "Daytripper". "Summershine" is especially great pop music maybe a bit like Aztec Camera. These are all very satisfying pop records.

(Sarah)

SHANGRI-LAS "Leaders Of The Pack" CD

I love all these girl groups like the Ronettes and the Shirelles or the Supremes. But for some reason, the Shangri-Las were always my favorites. There was something about them that seemed a little nastier and I've always dug it. I loved Mary Weiss and the Ganser sisters. They were teen girls singing about bikers, death and being runaways. Plus, they rocked out

and were wearing leather. They were cool and, I don't want to say "slutty", but they were in that '50s JD novel sort of way. The fact that it was almost certainly all fiction made it easy to dig into.

The Shangri-Las were a singles group, so you really don't need their album "Shangri-Las '65". This collection of all their best moments is relentless. All the amazing hits are here. "Remember (Walking In The Sand)" is here and is even weirder than I remember it. "The Train From Kansas City"..."Leader Of The Pack"... They all sound great.

My favorite of the big hits will always be "Give Him A Great Big Kiss". I love, love, love the old footage from Shindig of them performing this song and I can watch it over and over. For some reason, it always sends a chill up my spine when Mary modulates into the minor key on the rushed line "tell him that I'll always be there". It really kills me.

Nearly 30 tracks, you get a lot of cool stuff here including less known wonders like "Heaven Only Knows" and "Dressed In Black". (Snapper)

THIS BIKE IS A PIPE BOMB "Dance Party With..." 10"

THIS BIKE IS A PIPE BOMB "Front Seat Solidarity" LP

THIS BIKE IS A PIPE BOMB "Three Way Tie For A Fifth" LP

It's very likely that This Bike Is A Pipe Bomb have never even heard of Short Dogs Grow. But I hope I'm wrong because they are making the music I think we all hoped Short Dogs would make after their amazing debut... but didn't.

"Dance Party..." is such a great starting place. Desperate, possibly alcohol soaked harmonies and a million hooks, it's a record you can't help but love. You can look at all the obvious stuff like the country elements and the fiddle playing and think you know. But the songwriting is as sweet as the Slushpuppies or Wwax. "Imperfection" is like their take on one of those magic songs by Nar. Don't know Nar? You better learn.

The production is weirdly cleaner on "Front Seat Solidarity". Doubled vocals and a sweeter guitar sound, the band also reach out a bit with some stranger arrangements like the intro to "Selma". "Trains And Cops" is such a good song I almost don't hate trains anymore. It's a bit like what Nuisance were doing at the end. Don't know Nuisance? What the hell?

"Three Way Tie For A Fifth" is the group's most recent record and it's book ended by a couple of biographies on Jack Johnson and Sonny Liston. Boxers? I guess I can see that fitting in with the American mythological motif of the group. Maybe I'm totally insane, but at times, especially when they delve into minor scales (which they didn't do much of previously) they're almost like the Pixies. Okay, you know the Pixies. (Plan-It-X Records)

THIS IS MY FIST "A History Of Rats" LP

It's been a while since Mike Thorn forced me to buy this band's fantastic debut 7". Since then we got the chance to play with them in the Bay and I've interviewed them for an upcoming issue of my zine. Very cool. Now, we just need to sort out that split single...

This is the same line-up as on the 7" which is to say it's got little to do with the band now. But that's okay. It's still great and Tim Green can really get some serious guitar and drum sounds. It's funny, the No Idea website says it's like Joan Jett meets the Avengers. Wow. I don't really hear any of that. In a strange way this record reminds me of the Wipers. Maybe it's the album title. Maybe it's that Tim Green is a fan and is probably pretty adept at getting that sound. But it's got something to do with the warm open chord guitar playing without really sounding like Husker Du or folky punk like Pipe Bomb.

Annie's raspy but sweet vocals are perfect for this kind of music. It's catchy as hell. But it's got a lot of edge and cuts through the huge guitars. It's like if Blake had a little sister.

"A History Of Rats" is twelve quick songs and comes in at under half an hour. That's all you need and I guess that's all you get. (No Idea Records)

FILM

BULLY (dir. Larry Clark)

ALPHA DOG (dir. Nick Cassavetes)

I really dig Nick Cassavetes and not just because of his dad. I do think it's really cool that having a father like John Cassavetes must have predestined him to make such realistic and unrelenting films. I never did see "John Q" but I loved "She's So Lovely" and, uh, enjoyed "The Notebook". I swear it's true. It was, y'know, junk food between decent films...

It was just a matter of time before his style of hyper-real film making collided with true crime and "Alpha Dog" has unexpectedly sent

Cassavetes into the realm of Larry Clark in his stronger moments. It's hard to watch "Alpha Dog" and not be reminded of the powerful "Bully".

The stories are both fascinating to an outsider like me. The real themes are of undisciplined affluence colliding with teen hormones equaling a sort of bourgeois Lord of the Flies. I guess in those terms it's an antidote or at least a negating of William Golding's misanthropic story. It's hard for me to even imagine what the lives of extremely privileged, unstructured, white teens are like and in many ways, it's a fascinating nightmare. Part of what makes these films so totally appealing to me is that they enter a realm that causes someone like me to go into culture shock. I can travel the world, but I've never been privy to the secret garden of big screen TVs, new sports cars and non-stop fucking and drugging. It's as fascinating as finding life on Mars.

The kids in both of these movies are fucked. You almost can't believe that these kids get away with the amount of sex and drugs they do. But, of course, that's the least of their worries. There's an overall feeling in both of these films that the lack of an internal structure leads them all to rely on the pack for any and all reference points. That's all well and good when it's the casual thoughtless that guides these mostly pathetic lives. When the pack gets the whiff of murder, however, it can be a sinking anchor that none of the group can escape.

"Bully" and "Alpha Dog" are both based on true stories. "Bully" follows the real story most closely using actual names and even shooting much of the film at the real locations. It's hard to believe that Pizza Hut allowed them to shoot the scene where years earlier the real killers planned their murder. In a nutshell, Bobby Kent is a bully in the worst way. He beats the shit out of his friend. He rapes girls. He is a complete sociopath and his best friend Marty is too deep in with his own insecurities and confusions to get away. With the encouragement of his girlfriend, he and his fucked up, druggy crew hatch a plan to murder Kent. From the start, you know things are going to go poorly. But watching them unravel in such a matter of fact way is what's mostly surprising. The choices of different levels of violence are so completely banal you have to wonder how arbitrary are all the decisions and what lead to kids having such alien value systems.

Larry Clark is great at making the real look hyper-real and he does it without always relying on documentary style techniques. That this movie is almost shot like a teen film of the '80s leaves you less prepared for the more horrendous moments even when they are only dialog. The cast is fantastic with Nick Stahl, who is possibly the greatest young actor in the States, as Bobby Kent. Marty is played by Brad Renfro and his totally unstable girlfriend is amazingly portrayed by Rachel Miner. Bijou Phillips, the great Michael Pitt and Kelli Garner are all fantastic as the druggy, sex buddies. Daniel Franzese, who pretty much stole "Mean Girls", is amazing as he is able to switch from sort of funny to sort of terrifying in a blink. There were lots of stories about the cast being out of control, themselves drugging and fucking each other into oblivion. I have no idea if any of that is true. But, hey, it's Renfro and Phillips, would you be that shocked?

"Alpha Dog" so desperately wants to reveal the true names and places. It's clearly based on a real story to the point where witnesses in the actual court case are pointed out throughout the film. Even the ending sequence that anyone familiar with the real case knows took place in Brazil, is said to be in Paraguay. But Cassavetes can't resist using "Girl From Ipanema" as the soundtrack.

Johnny Truelove is a drug dealer and if you think that name is incredible, the real guys name is Jesse James Hollywood. No shit. Jake Mazursky, real name Benjamin Markowitz, worked for Truelove as a dealer. After some vaguely defined fuck-up, he winds up in debt to Truelove for a little over a grand. This leads to a violent confrontation which escalates further and further, exposing Truelove's weakness as well as Mazursky's instability. The guy was a meth head psycho-path, a Jew with a swastika tattoo across his chest. Gathering his posse, Truelove decides to take revenge on Mazursky by kidnapping his little brother, Zach (Nicholas Markowitz). Of course, all of these guys for the most part are gangster poseurs, they've got the guns, the drugs and the lifestyle. But none of them are killers. They're just kids. In fact, the more Zach hangs out with Truelove's crew, the more they enjoy each others company. Zach even loses his virginity to one of the girls. But in that same unstructured way that lead to the murder in "Bully", a few confused decisions and the reality of trying to deal logically with tweakers and the film takes a very unexpectedly turn into darkness.

Cassavetes, here, while utilizing a lot of his father's technique of shooting everything like a drama, where the any action is relatively incidental, makes for a surprisingly effective film that never leads on to its tragic conclusion until you're sucked in. Not as hip a cast as "Bully", there are still mostly really great performances with Justin Timberlake, I swear to God, really outstanding as Frankie, Truelove's partner in crime.

His growing friendship with Zach, played convincingly by Anton Yelchin from "Huff", at times almost resembles "Midnight Run". Emile Hirsch as Truelove looks like a crazy, younger, smaller, mean version of Jack Black. He's great and looks like one of those dicks you imagine would hang out with Fred Durst, you know? Ben Foster (who I'll always think of as Eli from "Freaks And Geeks") is most impressive as the totally unstable, drugged out, psychopath, Jake Mazursky. He's so intense you almost have to laugh at some of his decisions. He's dumb and says and does dumb things. But his anger is so deep even his most ridiculous lines seem real. Lots of other interesting people pop up in this film all doing their part like Alex Kingston as one of the parents on X or Amanda Seyfried (from "Veronica Mars") who takes Zach's virginity in the pool or Lukas Haas who is always great. There are even some older, big names here like Bruce Willis, Sharon Stone, Alan Thicke (I'm just as surprised as you) and the great Harry Dean Stanton.

I guess in some subconscious ways I like these films because they confirm one of my great fears, that the rich kids that will one day run this world are far more fucked up than the craziest of the gangbangers in the hood. It's a completely demented social system built out of confusion and violence, as it's not linked to any sort of value system, is merely another affectation to be used or discarded.

(Universal Studios, Lions Gate)

CAVE OF THE YELLOW DOG, THE (dir. By Byambasuren Davaa)

From the director of the wonderful "Story of the Weeping Camel" comes a new look at Mongolian nomadic life. It seems like some of the best movies today blur the lines between fiction and documentary, and this is one of the best examples of that. In some ways, you could take this story of a young girl who finds a puppy she wants to keep against her father's wishes and make it into some sort of lame Disney feature changing Mongolia for the old West or something like that. The story is sweet and sort of sentimental. But it works for this film as its simple framework let the director focus on the daily rituals of the family, capturing many real moments and finding ways to work them into the overall context of the film.

I often worry if the appeal of movies like this is 100% voyeuristic or exoticizing, and I suppose to a certain extent it has to be. It's really fascinating to see the mundane moments of nomadic life and the daily chores and rituals they go through. I couldn't help but be fascinated as the film rewards you by showing you the entire process involved in breaking down their portable home and packing up the caravan.

I guess I get into a little trouble when I feel like I'm just watching this family thinking, "wow, they are just so different and interesting." Nothing wrong with that, I guess. It just feels weird growing up in Hawaii, being Hawaiian and resenting when tourists would come over and basically give me the same treatment.

Mongolia is astoundingly beautiful. This film is striking equally because of the scenery and the cinematography. "Cave of the Yellow Dog" just shows how very wrong I was in any opinion I had developed about Mongolia as a kid growing up.

Plus, the dog? Cutest thing you'll ever see.
(Tartan Video)

DEATH NOTE (dir. Shusuke Kaneko)

The last time we were in Japan, Death Note was the big manga in a lot of the shops. I couldn't read it but it looked so great I picked up a few copies to bring back home. I was able to somewhat follow the story but was really excited to know that they had made a movie out of it.

The Death Note owned by the Gods of Death. If a mortal finds the book, they can use it by writing someone's name in it and that person will die in 40 seconds of a heart attack unless otherwise specified. In this story, the notebook is found by Light, the teen son of a police investigator that uses the book to kill criminals who have gone unpunished. As that distinction becomes more and more arbitrary, Light begins to change with his motives becoming less altruistic with every kill. With the police (Light's dad leading the investigation) trying to find out who is behind all of the vigilante murders, a young genius, who goes by the name "L" assists them in what turns into a clandestine chess match between him and Light.

One more thing, once you touch a death notebook, the God of Death who it belongs to becomes visible to you. The animated, extremely asian looking demon, Ryuuk, appears to Light and follows him everywhere. He becomes something of a mystic and empathizer sort of like a scary (scarier?) version of the Rabbit in "Harvey".

The story, of course as with all Mangas, gets much more complicated not only because other factors, supernatural and otherwise, interfere with Light and L's plans. But because they are teens and there are banal teen situations to deal with.

It's a great, fun film that seems to have been made for television. Light is played by Tatsuya Fujiwara from "Battle Royale" and "Persona". L is played by Ken'ichi Matsuyama from "Yamato" (another strange CGI film from Japan), "Linda Linda Linda" and "Bright Future" (the Kiyoshi Kurosawa breakthrough). Best of all, the voice of Ryuuk is done by Shido Nakamura from "Fearless", "Neighbor No. 13" and, one of my all time favorites, "Ping Pong".

Released as two films, you really need to see "Death Note" and "Death Note 2" (aka "Death Note: The Last Name") together as they are all one long story. It's well-worth watching this somewhat surreal series just to get to the vignette about a tragic God of Death named Jealous. It's one of the many highlights of this series.

(Kam and Ronson Enterprise)

DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION PART III (Dir. Penelope Spheeris) I finally got around to watching the third Decline finally. I expected to hate it. Am I the only person on the planet who thinks the second one is amusing for five minutes but is otherwise unwatchable? Anyway, I dug it... almost as much as the first one.

No, of course it doesn't have the same meaning. But if I could divorce my relationship with West Coast punk rock for a moment and just look at this as a documentary, it's really great. The kids are a lot more interesting than I would have thought and I've dealt with several of them first hand. Shit, I remember that one kid fucking some girl at Epicenter and then freaking out because someone stole his leather jacket. At the time I thought they were all morons.

The kids in this one are actually just about as interesting as the kids in the first Decline though in a very different way. I feel a lot more empathy towards them maybe because we actually get to see how they live in the streets. Knowing what shit it is to be a squatter in America and how tough you have to be to survive that way; it's amazing that most of these kids are still lucid and kind of witty. In fact, living on the streets, coming from abusive families almost across the board, you would expect these kids to be all really unstable and fucked up. But most of them are actually quite pleasant. At the end, when the epilogue shows that one of them had been murdered by his girlfriend it really comes as a surprise.

Obviously if you were around for the first Decline you are gonna be skeptical about this one. These kids are all new jacks and even though I like Final Conflict and Naked Aggression, you can't compare it to Flag and X. But if you think of Decline III as a sociological study and not a music documentary, it's very compelling with unbelievable insights in to a world that seems beyond incredible. With the fucked up punk house, the kids being abused, the danger of street life, the whole movies makes you continually wonder how the human spirit can adapt to the most fucked situation. When some of the kids discuss a squat fire that killed one of their friends, it's really tough and the most real moment of all three films.

What I really want to know is how many of the kids have died since and what happened to the girl on trial for murdering her boyfriend. Anyone?

(VHS given out free direct from Decline web site)

GLAMOROUS LIFE OF SANCHIKO HANAI, THE (Dir. Mitsuru Meike)

This is one of the strangest creative leaps ever in cinema. A Situationist Porno from Japan? What is going on over there? I can never tell if I think they are in many ways years ahead of the west or if they are completely degenerating into an entirely indefinable, somewhat unnatural, artificial reality.

"Sanchiko Hanai" isn't any sort of answer but it's pretty incredible. First and foremost, this is a pink film. If you don't know what that is, you should probably just stay away. Pink is a Japanese softcore film style that started in the '60s and still thrives today in an independent distribution network that works right up to the limits of Japans strict censorship laws. The film itself is at times a commentary on that as the titular character is a call girl (played by Emi Kuroda) who gets shot in the head when caught in the crossfire between Korean terrorists. While the sex scenes (and in the Pink tradition they are every ten minutes) borderline on what you'll find in some American R and NC-17 rated flicks, for most of the movie she has an open bullet wound in the middle of her head!

Now I wasn't just being cute when I say that this is Situ Porn. The film involves long sections of found footage collages that comment on everything from nuclear proliferation to globalism and fascism. Even more specifically, one sex scenes involves the reanimated finger of George W. Bush molesting Sanchiko while a TV monitor looks on. The TV monitor shows detoured footage of Bush making comments both sexual and ideological. It's the ultimate use of detournement as a means of humiliating

government power while at the same time fulfilling it's obligation as porn.

In fact I would even say it is post-Situ even though it uses Situationist technique and it's not mere coincidence. There is a direct reference where, during a sex scene with a metaphysical academic scholar Sanchiko says "too much situationism and not enough practicalism" as she rubs his face in her tits. She later tells him "Paradise Lost lacks the material base of pessimism" before administering a blow job. It's porn for post-structuralists. If only Foucault were alive to see this. It's the Japanese sleaze future of his sex histories.

Even though there are no genitals and no actual penetration, this is a classic Pink film, so it's not for everybody. Pink films, at least modern ones, involve a lot of fake sperm and usually at least one non-consensual scene. It's hard to say if this film helps explain that as some sort of free play between signifiers. But it strangely works on two levels making a different kind of porn as much as it is a different kind of art film. You really can't pretend to have one without the other. If you are caught renting this and try to pass it off as just an art flick... c'mon... it serves the same purpose as "Zero Woman" or "Weather Woman" or most other Japanese films ending with the word "woman". But if you can hang with that... imagine if you took some of the philosophical approach of Catherine Breillart and used it for kitsch instead of drama.

Incidentally, it's worth noting that DVD release includes the original straight porn that this was based on as well as the equally strange, shot on video, "Adventures of Sanchiko Hanai". More Emi Kuroda. More GW. More complete strangeness.

(Palm Pictures)

HEIR TO AN EXECUTION (Dir. Ivy Meeropol)

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg have always been sort of anti-heroes or maybe anti-idols to me. For me, especially as a bitter teen, it was a no lose situation. If they were innocent, as they almost definitely were of the crime they were condemned for, than they were communist martyrs and their generations Sacco and Vanzetti. If they were guilty, and it seems like they did have some involvement in espionage, good for them and fuck the pentagon.

I avoided seeing this movie when it first came out for fear that it was some sort of revisionist document about how the Rosenbergs were selfish and should have been less politically strident at least for the sake of their children. There's this strange notion that family is more important than integrity, which is something I've never in my life believed. Made by the Rosenberg's granddaughter, Ivy Meeropol, the question is raised but deftly countered with the reasoning by comrades that if you are a truly ideological person, there is no other option. We're not all rats.

So, this film works in two ways. On the one hand, it is a really interesting look on the story of the Rosenbergs with great interviews with co-defendant Morton Sobell (who after spending nearly two decades in prison for not ratting out anyone wasn't about to spill any secrets in this film) and comrades Abe Osheroff (a former member of the CPUSA, the Abraham Lincoln Brigades and the Civil Rights Movement) and Miriam Moskowitz (who befriended Ethel while imprisoned for her own involvement as a Soviet spy). It's hard not to feel inspired by these old timers and their stories of revolutionary epiphany and the integrity of the people who called themselves socialist.

On the other hand, it's an interesting story of family essentially rocked by murder. The main difference between this film and other true crime tales is that this story swings to the left as it was not just a lynching but the American way of life that lead to these killings. Though it seems like most of the relatives are either too ashamed to admit to being related to Julius and Ethel or still convinced of their guilt, it seems incredible that the direct descendants all turned out so lucid and well-rounded.

I was surprised at how moving I found a lot of the film. Watching films like this, it's easy to get angry, at the courts, the government, the FBI, the family... I couldn't believe how sad this film made me feel. I thought the most chilling interview was with the widower of the Rabbi present at the execution. The idea that they weren't completely prepared to die was frightening and the thought that Julius was executed first because he seemed the most nervous about it really shook the strident, dignified image I've had of my heroes. Death is terrifying even when it's the right thing to do.

The film isn't entirely satisfying. At one point, the director gets as far as David and Ruth Greenglass's (Ethel's brother and sister-in-law who essentially lied to save their own skins, thus condemning the Rosenbergs. Essentially the Elia Kazan of this story) house, but then drives away. You really want her to break down the door which I guess wouldn't really be the right thing. You're just left with an empty feeling that even today, with all we know, some people got away with murder.

(HBO Home Movies)

I AM AN S+M WRITER (dir. By Ryuichi Hiroki)

From the land of Nobuyoshi Araki, Nikatsu Pink and tentacle porn comes the first self-aware comedy able to laugh and display the ridiculous world of Japanese rape porn. Look, I'm part Japanese (among other things) and I've spent some time in Japan and I'm definitely fascinated with the "dark side", if you will. But I was still flabbergasted when I first found out that the surprisingly tame Rapeman films (a superhero that punishes evil do-ers with rape) were partially comedies! Rapeman is a hero, a nerdy school teacher by day and in one episode he uses his powers on some evil pornographers who force schoolgirls into making dirty movies. What's going on over there?

Well, lefty, feminist, Westerners trying to analyze the Japanese sex industry, it's just impossible. I don't think there's any point in trying. In some ways I think of Western feminism's critiques of the Japanese sex industry sort of like animal rights advocates talking about indigenous people whaling. I can see where both sides are coming from but they really have zero common ground for discussion. Learning the social structure is more complicated than learning the language, and you're not going to get any cultural history from this comedy. "I Am An S+M Writer" tells the story of a would-be novelist who finds out all to well that the novel is dead and winds up making a pretty good living writing S+M porn. In order to get inspiration and better detail (he still takes his writing very seriously) he hires a young couple to act out scenes for him. His wife seems pretty unhappy about the situation. But there are other problems in their marriage that have nothing to do with his day job.

This film is like a Foucault-ian comedy, bluntly flowing in and out of role playing, with none of the participants every getting too emotionally connected to the S+M. But the film is also sort of a spoof on a writer taking himself too seriously. Having aesthetic and technical discussions with the subjects while in the middle of rope torture or finding the perfect phrasing while the others are rutting away in the corner is like classic farce.

Add to that some genuinely surreal moments and lots of interesting locations and the film is like if Woody Allen made "Eraserhead". Ryuichi Hiroki is the perfect director for this as he's done the great drama "Tokyo Trash Baby" but, like many of his generation of film makers, got his start making sex films like "Captured For Sex 2". It's REALLY not for anyone. There's a lot of nudity and even though it's mostly used for comedic effect, there is a fair amount of typical Japanese bondage. But S+M is mostly just a really funny and unique vehicle for telling the story of a married couple in trouble.

(Kino Video)

ONCE UPON ATARI (Dir. Howard Scott Warshaw)

STARWOIDS (Dir. Dennis Przywara)

UBER GOOBER (Dir. Steve Metz)

Maybe it's because I'm going through some sort of mid-life crisis, but I've been looking back over my youth and I've come to the same conclusions over and over: A) I was a fucked up kid and B) I was also a nerd. The first part, well, that's for me and my shrink to deal with. The second part is something that I think a lot, though not most, people my age are experiencing. One symptom of this insanity is the sudden proliferation of "nerd-umentaries". These are films that, knowing they only appeal to current and former nerds, focus on a seemingly pointless sub-genre elevating them to a level that's more than hobby but hopefully not all-consuming. These films include "Trekkies", "A Regular Frankie Fan" (about Rocky Horror die-hards) and "Otaku Unite" (about anime fans and the surreal world of Cosplay). "Once Upon Atari", "Starwoids" and "Uber Goober" are my favorites mostly because even though I've dabbled in all nerd areas, these were the most important to me.

"Once Upon Atari" is a four part series and let's face it, if you weren't ever into Atari, and I mean, INTO it, this could be the most boring movie of all time. But I love it. If you were a super nerd like me, it wasn't enough to be mesmerized by Missile Command, Yar's Revenge and, the greatest video game of all, Defender. The stories about Atari being run as a bunch of burner, druggie, freaked out, intellectuals was thrilling. In late '70s and early '80s, post-war hippie-dome was all about Science Fiction, sex, drugs and, to a lesser extent, rock-n-roll and these programmers were the epitome of that lifestyle. You could even argue that it was ideological, their total defiance of business school ethics and any sense of normality. "Once Upon Atari" is made up 99% of talking heads with all the great programmers of that scene with some great anecdotes and truisms that, if you're into it, is quite moving.

"Starwoids" is a movie that I initially had problems with. I am

one of those people that didn't like "Phantom Menace" so it didn't really intrigue me that these kids were standing in line for a month like back in the old days. For a lot of people like myself that were crazy for Star Wars the first time around (I admit that I saw the first one in the theater at least 25 times, sometimes coming to the first showing and watching it all day long) to pretend like we were never nerds. But distancing ourselves from the new Star Wars flicks we tried to create some sort of hierarchy within the nerd-dome, which was a total failure. Let's face it, watching "A New Hope" now, I can't help but think that C3PO and R2 are no less annoying than Jar Jar. So I finally watched this film and was really into it. I was especially thrilled by the initial sequence of fans going to see some lame Denzel flick just to catch the "Phantom Menace" trailer. The pure joy these fans are feeling when they finally get to see the movie, I dunno, I could really relate to it. I saw "The Phantom Menace" in San Francisco, the first showing at midnight. I stood in line, as a kid, for HOURS to see "Empire" when it first came out. Ditto for "Jedi". These films were important to me and because of that feeling, it wasn't until a few hours later that I realized, hey, "Phantom" isn't that good. Somehow, "Starwoids" captures that excited feeling that only the wingnut fans understand.

Fuck off, yes, I used to really be into RPGs. AD&D? Sure. Traveler? Absolutely. Fuck it, I loved Gamma World, Boot Hill, Top Secret, all those stupid TSR games not to mention Ogre, Squad Leader, Panzer Blitz and so many others. I loved collecting the figures and I loved reading modules. It was fun and it, in a weird way, made it easy for me to conceptualize and punk rock underground / counter-culture that, real or not, became my home for most of the '80s and '90s. "Uber Goober" is not for anyone unfamiliar with the name Gary Gygax. For that matter, if you've never held 20-sided dice in your hand (essential for percentages) than this film is not for you. But if you get it, if you know why the Monster Manual is more "realistic" than the Fiend Folio, than this film is worth checking out. I actually found it interesting, if not compelling, to see what level of involvement and participation RPG-ers are at. Even though I thought it was interesting that people were still acting out many scenarios, I was really relieved to know that most gamers were just nerds like me happy to sit around a table with their charts, dice and rule books.

I even find those earlier mentioned nerd-umentaries to be fun. I did love Star Trek, though I've always been more interested in the conventions than the dressing up or the fan-fiction. I still think that "Rocky Horror" is great because it's so hard to find a movie that is sexy AND totally hilarious at the same time. It's usually one or the other. Though I've never been crazy about anime, it's a little after my time in nerd-dome, I can appreciate it. If there were cos-play nerd girls around when I was a teen, maybe I wouldn't have been so lonely.

(Scott West Production, Film Threat, Scum Crew Pictures)

RED DOORS (Dir. Georgia Lee)

I have a tendency to check out anything Asian American especially if it has to do with film. Shit, I even watched "The Fast And The Furious: Tokyo Drift". It's funny because even in films I don't like I find myself searching for something I can relate to. But even with films I liked, like "Better Luck Tomorrow" or "Yellow", there's overall something bland about most of these movies. With the exception of Jon Moritsugu, I dunno, the only thing indie about these films that make them outside of the mainstream is the fact that there are Asians. It's all so middle class in a way.

"Red Doors" isn't so different. But I really dug this film. I think it's because the main characters didn't feel obligated to act how Asian audiences want them to act. I really enjoyed seeing three Asian Americans closer to my age group (ie. Not a bunch of school kids) dealing with seemingly mundane issues. The eldest sister, in her way, is walking away from her fiancé and her life of yuppiedom. The middle sister is crashing into a new friend's completely different lifestyle eventually learning something about her own sexuality. The youngest is a crazy riot grrrl who runs a high school hip hop dance troupe. In their way, all three women are strong and the very thing that lights up the bulletin boards is another thing I relate to; it's a film about Asian Americans who don't feel obligated to date other Asian Americans.

Sorry, but that's life. As someone who has made it a point to try and not be surrounded by any one ethnicity, I've never felt obligated to "date Asian" and I rarely find myself in a social setting that's 100% Asian. I never could relate to that in a lot of these films. Instead, this movie really does reflect what it's like for most Asian Americans, the new generation who think of themselves as something other than Asian or American. You date who you know and if you're lucky that's a diverse group of people.

I know that there was some hoopla (very little when I think about it) with Asian dudes whining about how there are no Asian male actors in the

film and that all of the characters are dating gwai los. It's so embarrassing and shallow. What a stupid reason to attack a film! Some guys wrote that it reinforced Asian stereotypes which is crazy as all three of the women are VERY dominant in their roles. One of them is a lesbian, for fuck's sake, which seems to also blow Asian dude brains. Then there are the people complaining that Asian American filmmakers should hire Asian American actors to keep them working which is such a hunk of shit. Jon Moritsugu is the most important Asian American filmmakers of all time. Shit, he's one of the most important filmmakers period. He's done entire films where none of the main characters are Asian. That sure as fuck doesn't diminish the final product. What is with these people making such trivial attacks on one of the few Asian American directors working at all?

Georgia Lee is pretty cool. She seems like a nice person and smart as hell. A couple of her short films got picked up by PBS and she apprenticed under Scorsese. She is often compared to Ang Lee and "Red Doors" defo has an "Eat Drink Man Woman" quality to it. A little hipper, it's still a movie about reconciliation and compromise from both sides of the Asian American puzzle. Three sisters are living their own independent lives finding love in their own convoluted ways. The family is brought back together when their father, suicidal after his retirement, leaves home without telling anyone to live at a Buddhist monastery. It's not so complicated; in fact, the basic plot is quite mundane. But what happens along the way shows aspects of modern Asian American life that doesn't appear in other films. I grew up in a very different background. This film is in bourg-y Connecticut whereas I grew up in slummy Nanakuli. But I still recognized a lot of things in terms of family interaction that I almost never experience in films. Georgia Lee is a lot like Ang Lee in some ways. But if I had to pick a filmmaker that also captured her sexual expressiveness as well as cerebrally satisfying silent introspections, she reminds me of some of Wayne Wang's earlier works.

Also, this is a pretty movie. The footage at the monastery is especially nice looking. Lee's earlier shorts like "Educated" were great and sort of hyper-stylistic. So it was nice to see so much of this film as being subtle. When it isn't, it's still rich with color. Of course, it is hard to go wrong any time you shoot a Chinese dinner sequence.

I guess there still isn't a movie that completely captures what it means to be Asian American for me. I've yet to find an Asian American male character in any film that I can totally get behind. Filmmakers at this point aren't writing that way and maybe have no intention of writing an Asian American male that doesn't relate to guys without worrying about stereotypes. I guess I should be happy there are characters at all that I relate to regardless of sex, ethnicity or whatever. But isn't it possible to be unique even within the things that I was born into?
(Warner Home Entertainment)

RIDING ALONE FOR THOUSANDS OF MILES (dir. By Zhang Yimou)
I have to admit that I wasn't really a fan of "Hero" or "House of Flying Daggers". I dunno. They were nice to look at. But those big action films seemed sort of beneath such a great director like Zhang Yimou. It seemed weird that he would do those flicks right when he was making some of his most profound work with "The Road Home" and "Not One Less". I guess everyone has to pay the bills.

So I was very happy to hear about this film. I really, really loved this film. It's got all the things I love about his earlier work. It's beautiful. It's small, interpersonally. It's huge, cinematically. It's a simple story told in a way never told before.

Takata is an older Japanese man who finds out that his estranged son is dying. His son is a documentarian and a fan of Chinese folk opera. He had meant to go back to the Yunnan area to record a performance, but was now stuck in the hospital. Takata, though stoic and socially awkward, decides it's his mission to leave his tiny Japanese fishing village and travel throughout Yunnan to videotape this opera.

The story gets complicated as he finds out that the person who he wanted has recently been arrested and would be in jail for the next year. Takata needs to find a way to make his recording from prison.

It's a pretty simple idea that is colored by the many interesting characters Zhang introduces throughout. In addition, the location footage from Yunnan (and even Japan for that matter) is pretty incredible. I'm stuck in Texas which sucks because this really seems like the kind of film to see in the theater. If it played here, it was for a minute. I'm sure Zhang Yimou will keep making the big movies for the big money. But with any luck he'll keep making the real films every few years as well.
(Sony Pictures)

SHERRYBABY (dir. By Laurie Collyer)

I think Maggie Gyllenhaal is great. From her start as the consummate supporting actor of Brian Cox-like status to her graduation as a Jennifer Jason Leigh style OH-MY-GOD-I-CAN'T-STOP-LOOKING horrifyingly frank lead, she's one of the unsung heroes of Hollywood in an age of none. Destined to be the Joan Cusack to Jake's John, she's had a secret history of interesting choices from "Cecil B. Demented" to the strange interpretation of Mary Gaitskill's "Secretary" to the (for the most part) underrated "Happy Endings".

One of the reasons I was excited about this flick was that it grouped her with two other actors that I think of as unsung heroes; Danny Trejo and Giancarlo Esposito. All three of them are a bit too outside, a bit too smart, a bit too dignified to be a huge star. Their on the outside and the fact that they don't look like Hollywood is probably part of their appeal to me.

SherryBaby is no fun, but it's a worthy journey. The film starts with recovering junkie, Sherry, on the long bus ride out of prison. Knowing what we know about the cast from the start we know this is going to be a tough film. Staying clean is just one of many major obstacles to staying out of prison once you're first released. Acclimating with her young daughter, her brother (who has been raising her daughter) and his wife makes for some of the most painful scenes to watch which says a lot in a film where the main character lives in a halfway house and is dealing with druggies, dealers, etc.

Sherry's relationship with Trejo's character, Dean, is superficially sordid but winds up being the only completely comforting moments in the film. Meeting at an NA meeting, he remembers her from back when she was an underage stripper. Aside from the power of the two characters coming together, it's great to see Trejo and Gyllenhaal together as there is something similar about the two. What makes their "looks" outside of the Hollywood mainstream is what makes them so physically appealing. In very different ways, their faces alone are ripe with character. There's something super real about them, even their bodies, and it's uniquely appealing.

One of the hardest aspects of the movie for a lot of viewers is Sherry's use of her body and sexuality to get what she wants. In one scene, her employment counselor wants to send her off to work in a factory though she's been trained to work with kids. To get what she wants she offers to blow him and is pissed off after the deed is done. It seems her time in prison, what's often described as a totally dehumanizing situation, has in fact removed her from her body in a way. She uses her sex as a means to an end, not so much escaping reality but able to reduce herself to her physical parts. The problem is putting the parts back together as her occasional sudden burst of rage seems even a little surprising to her.

Sort of a modern "Panic In Needle Park" mixed with "She's So Lovely", this movie certainly isn't easy to watch. But, again, it's well worth the time spent.
(Universal Studios)

**Say now, my trip in line with others
Have the door pointing to others
Door means a separate wall is in between
Symbols assert the big butt whoopin'**

**Close your eyes
Open them
Take our test
Close your eyes
Open them
Not since those days**

**The rhythm that is all head
What makes
Breaks the fakes**

**And when reality appears digital
And the big hankering cometh
I'll vote yes for life in the big choice poll
I'll be glad I did**

**Your mind
Organized by nazis
Your heart and mind conspiring**

**Forever with you
Ever without you**